**Learning pathways**

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WITH the second wave of the pandemic upon us, we have had to crawl back into our caves. Schools were striving hard to address the learning gaps in the few weeks of faceto-face teaching they managed before closing down again. Whilst this back-and-forth pendulum swing between face-to-face and online schooling has affected students in a number of ways, it has also opened up the possibilities of a blended approach.

As reliance on learning through videos increases, it takes us slowly away from dependence on textbooks as the primary source of information. Schools are now successfully experimenting with different models of imparting education. Blended learning is not so much an innovation as the need of the hour as ourforced dependence on digital solutions increases by the day. In fact, the concept of blended learning itself has expanded dramatically as schools explore options to stay anoat in difñcult economic circumstances. Blended learning may be a solution that not only allows schools to continue their work, but also empowers teachers and students to find avenues that were previously unexploited.

Our heavy reliance on the instructional model has given way to more task-based experiences for students, experiments that can be conducted at home, spurring craftsmanship and immersive techniques. This `enriched virtual remote` model teaches students to interact with the teacher on a need basis, having to complete the goals of the curriculum largely through tasks which set targets for them. This approach works seamlessly for secondary and university students who may have the added motivation to move on to further studies or the job market. For younger students, a `fiipped classroom` approach where students are shown videos on subject content followed by a guided online discussion, assignments and perhaps a face-to-face assessment may be more viable in helping them adjust to the demands of digital education.

For still younger students, an entirely experiential method of individual rotation blended learning may be relatively helpful.

Students are divided into small groups that `rotate` between hands-on activities with the teacher. This model particularly supports play-based learning and children can get personalised learning opportunities where teachers focus on not more than six to eight children at one go. While one group has a break or moves to another activity, the teacher moves on to the next group and so on. Judging the success of the learning experience becomes a tad easier for teachers who get to `watch` the progress of children more closely, especially in the pre-primary years.

The challenge with most digital learningis the difficulty of assessment in large groups, which may exacerbate achievement gaps as some students fall through the cracks. The blended learning approach, however, works well if students come in for face-to-face booster classes and assessments once or twice a week. Many schools have successfully implemented this model of late, especially as they designate part of the day for students to show up in school and share the tasks they have completed.

As students shuttle between digital and physical spaces, they may develop a newfound awareness of their own capacity for independent study. The digital revolution spurred by the pandemic has not only changed the way education is imparted, but also our engagement, attitudes, and behaviour towards learning. On the one hand, it has somewhat slowed down the rat race that followed the frenzy of examinations. On the other, it has allowed schools to re-evaluate the need for nexibility in structures and demands on students` time, learning stylesand performance.

In terms of socialisation, children may find themselves thinking and acting more individualistically having been away from the `birds of a feather` syndrome of learning, working and playing togetherforthe large part of the day. Thismay also be prime time to re-establish the weakening family nucleus, with the opportunity for board games, movie time, exploring books and conversations about life. In fact, parents have become the primal fortress holding their children`s happiness and well-being together against the pervasive anxiety.

As we adapt to new ways of living and learning, the possibilities for discovery are immense. A close friend remarked that she has learnt so much more about her children`s individual personalities as they spend more time together, huddling close to discuss everything under the sun. Given her workload, she barely had time to plan their packed schedules. For many people like her, the robotic clockwork life has faded away, opening up new pathways to a deeper connection with family, meaningful conversations and bonding that was not possible in her erstwhile circumstances. The writer is senior manager, professional development at OUP, Pakistan.

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