Examining Learner Agency in Online Teaching

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Abstract Ever since the Gurukul system of education in India, the school education followed a Sage on stage approach. Over the past few decades, teachers have started to believe that a guide on the side approach is critical for deeper learning to take place among students. With the technological advancement in the field of education and evolving pedagogies, parents have also started to believe that learners must bear the responsibility of their learning under the supervision of teachers. Learner agency has different connotative meanings in different countries. In the present study, learner agency refers to a student’s ability to play an active role in their education [1]. Outburst of COVID-19 in India has led to the introduction of online teaching in most of the urban schools. Routine lifestyles of student’s have been changed due to lock down of the schools. Lockdown of schools has brought about changes in the Learner agency. Therefore, the present study is to examine the learner agency in an online teaching environment and to describe the changes in the learner agency due to the online learning environment. The study employed a qualitative research method to examine the changes in learner agency. A semi structured interview was conducted to a group of upper primary school students who were learning via online teaching. Study was able to examine the changes in learner agency due to online teaching and learning. The results of the study will help school teachers to understand the changes in learner agency in an online learning environment and how to support learner agency or to become co-agent? In an online teaching learning environment.

Keywords Online Teaching, Learner Agency, Upper Primary

1. Introduction

Learner agency has gained popularity over the last two decades among educational researchers. However, there is a paucity of research related to learner agency in distance learning [2]. Learner agency is now becoming a default expectation of learners [3]. Learner agency is perceived as learners’ latent potential for self-directed engagement [4]. Agency consists of both the ability and the preparedness of a learner to take action. Learners can be agentic which is evident in learning sites either from their interest in learning or from their commitment demonstrated towards an assignment or a task [5]. Learner agency “is the process in which students intentionally and somewhat proactively try to personalize and otherwise enrich both what is to be learned and the conditions and circumstances under which it is to be learned” [6]. The study assumes that the students these days have the ability to make choices and act on those choices to make a difference in their life [7]. The learner is actively involved in the learning process and is equally involved in interacting with the environment [8]. The learner needs to have the ability to act intentionally in order to be an agent during the learning process. The fundamental characteristics of agency are to empower individuals to play a part in their self-development, adaptation, and self-renewal in time of change [9]. As learners take an active role in seeking and internalizing their knowledge in the online environment, it has a significant effect on his or her academic achievement [10]. Learners make conscious choices and play an active role during the period of one’s own learning. The Learner agency shifts the ownership of learning from teachers to learners providing opportunity to have an understanding to be a part of the learning
design and to take responsible actions to intervene in the learning process. 

In the last two decades numerous researchers have conducted studies related to learner agency. The scope of those studies ranges from conceptual understanding to measurement of learner agency. However, there is a paucity of research on examining learner agency especially in online context and distance learning [2]. Learner agency has been researched with different perspectives such as Sociological perspectives, Psychological perspective, and technological perspectives. Learner agency is a dynamic process embedded with changes in time and context [11]. Research experiments in various disciplines such as educational psychology, cognitive psychology, complexity theory, socioemotional learning, and Educational technology determine the significance of giving learners’ opportunities to drive their learning and growth both individually and collectively [12].

Pajares in his study quotes that unless people believe that their actions can produce the outcomes they desire, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties [13]. Bandura in his study brings out that the core features of agency enable individuals to play a part in their self-development, adaptation, and self-renewal with changing times [9]. Van Lier (2008) argues that the agency is a core concept in constructing the identity of an individual. Nagaoka in his study mentions that agency depends upon intentionality and forethought to derive a course of action and adjust course as needed to reflect one’s identity, competencies, knowledge and skills, mindsets, and values [14]. Vaughn in his study defines agency as a student’s desire, ability and power to determine their own course of action [15].

Agency, however, is not a fixed quality, and it is not something that students do or do not have [16]. Nagaoka and colleagues, in their report on a developmental framework for young adult success, stated that a person may demonstrate solid agency in one setting and yet be unable to transfer such robust agency to another setting. Rather, agency can vary from context to context, and from time to time: agency is something that people do in social practice. This nature of agency can help teachers understand how a student may become active agents. Nagaoka and colleagues, in their report on a developmental framework for young adult success, stated that a person may demonstrate solid agency in one setting and yet be unable to transfer such a robust agency to another setting. Rather, agency can vary from context to context, and from time to time: agency is something that people do in social practice. This nature of agency can help teachers understand how a student may practice agency in one situation but not in another [17]. Therefore, the present study is to examine the learner agency in an online teaching environment and to describe the deviances from the usual learner agency behavior due to the online learning environment.

2. Methods

When we looked at the reviews of related literature for the present study, we found that there are quite a few studies which talk about the conceptual framework of the learner agency and its field of application. Few other studies are ethnographic studies related to learner agency. Thematic and survey studies related to learner agency were also found to be conducted in different parts of the world. The present study was aiming at finding the differences in the learner agency of upper primary school children from normal face to face learning environment to online teaching learning environment and due to the COVID-19 lockdown situations study resorted to qualitative methods. The study conducted a semi-structured interview to the students of upper primary school children of age ranging from 10 to 13 years (see
The research method followed for the present study is outlined in the figure 1 given below.

![Flowchart showing the study design outline](image)

Figure 1. Showing the study design outline

2.1. Scope and Limitations of the Study

The present study is conducted to examine the changes in learner agency in an online learning environment and describes the changes in learner agency due to the online learning environment. The study followed a qualitative research design. The data are collected from a semi-structured interview only. The sample of the study is restricted to the students studying in Upper primary schools in the age range of 11 to 13 years only.

2.2. Sample of the Study

Students of the age group between 11 to 13 years were considered for the sample of the study. These students are attending the upper primary school and now due to lockdown are attending online classes conducted by the schools. 10 students were selected at the convenience of the researchers and were subjected to semi-structured interviews each at a time [26]. Students in their later childhood are growing mentally, physically, socially, and emotionally at a faster pace. Students in their later childhood love to be led and are enthusiastic about taking independent responsibilities of their education. Hence the later childhood stage has been selected for the study as a sample. This is the age where the learner agency is in the formation stage and taking shape in an individual’s life.

2.3. Semi Structured Interview

The researchers constructed a semi structured interview questionnaire for the present study (See Table 1). These questions are open ended and cover almost all the components of learner agency. Open ended questions are followed by a spontaneously devised follow up questions to elicit more information from the participants. As the participants are of the age group 10 to 13, their honest responses can be obtained in one shot and they may vary in their response if we make more than one attempt to conduct an interview. We were a team of three to conduct interviews at different times and places. Hence researchers have resorted to semi structured interviews for the present study [27]. The one-on-one interview has been conducted to all the participants of the selected sample. As it is a semi structured interview, the questionnaire questions were asked in a random order and depending on the responses of each participant on spot, spontaneous follow up questions were asked to the interviewee. The responses obtained were diligently recorded and that formed the data of the study.

2.4. Validity of the Questionnaire

The constructed semi structured questionnaire has been subjected to face validity and content validity by the researchers and researchers arrived at a consensus while retaining each item of the questionnaire. Then the constructed semi structured questionnaire has been validated by a panel of experts who worked in the area of learner agency and their feedback was incorporated in the final form of the questionnaire. The items of the semi structured questionnaire are also in concurrence with the works of Zeiser et al [10] and Grip tape youth leadership board.
### Table 1. Showing the Semi structured interview questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No</th>
<th>Semi structured interview items</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Have you been punctual to all your online classes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Are you completing all the asynchronous assignments given to you on time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Were you multitasking during your online classes? Explain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Were you able to collaborate with your peers on learning using phone calls/ WhatsApp/ SMS? Explain</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Do you think you can achieve goals that are important to you? Explain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Were you distracted by complex assignments and its completion on time? Explain</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Do you sometimes log in to online class and not present in front of the computer? Explain</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Do you seek help while answering your online tests from parents or the internet? Elaborate</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Do you hesitate to clarify doubts in an online class? Elaborate</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>As you have a few hours of online classes in a day? What do you do in the remaining time? Explain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>If you were asked a question in online class for which you don't know the answer, what is your response? Elaborate</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Do you think online learning is good enough for your future life? Explain</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Do you think the online teaching, learning materials, and assessments are meaningful to your learning? Explain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Do you think you miss your teachers recognizing your work in online mode? Explain</td>
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</table>

### 3. Results and Discussion

The results and discussion of the present study have been explained in two sections. Section 1 describes the interview output and Section 2 describes the deviance from the learner agency with a word cloud.

**Section 1**

The data collected out of semi-structured interviews regarding the learner agency in online teaching-learning from upper primary school children have been interpreted. There were 14 open ended questions in the semi structured interview questionnaire. The questions were pertaining to different aspects of learner agency such as punctuality of students, assignments or tasks shared by teacher’s, collaboration, classroom interaction and communication among students and teachers, time management and task assigned, integrity of the students while taking online assignments, understanding student daily routine, their responses to questions posted online, their personal understanding, view point towards online teaching, and students voice towards the learning environments. The responses obtained for each of these questions from the respondents were thoroughly analysed and are interpreted in the following paragraphs;

(i) **Have you been punctual to all your online classes?**

   Majority of the students interviewed stated they were punctual to all the online classes that were scheduled. As the timetable was shared well in advance and they were familiar with the subject classes that were scheduled on a daily basis. Initially, some of the students did face issues of logging in late or re-login into their classes which was highly due to internet issues but as the day’s progressed they were able to ensure that these glitches were well taken care of. However, some of the students did mention that they were getting up late, and as they needed not to go to school physically, they were logging in with a casual approach and used to have their morning breakfast simultaneously.

(ii) **Are you completing all the asynchronous assignments given to you on time?**

   Most of the students felt they were able to work on the individual tasks or assignments that were assigned to them by teachers. Due to the lockdown, they in general felt that they had enough time to post the class hours to work on the assignments. Many of them did mention that it was difficult for them to prioritize on days when more than three subjects assignments had to be submitted at the same time. Some of the students did mention that they did not receive feedback to some of the assignments that were submitted, they did mention receiving constructive feedback on time would help them as they work on similar assignments or prepare for their final examination. Some students did not turn in the assignment and were pretending to be offline due to internet issues when the teacher was verifying their assignment submissions.

(iii) **Were you multitasking during your online classes? Explain**

   Some students felt it was challenging for them to listen and understand the concept taught by the teacher in a
particular subject and simultaneously making notes was a challenging task. Some students felt it was easier for them to make notes in subjects like English or Social Sciences but felt challenging when it came to solving mathematical problems. Some students felt, the online classes demanded more attention while the teacher was explaining the concept and hence giving not scope for multitasking. It was also noticed that many students who skipped their breakfast as they woke up late or skipped lunch as they had to switch from one class to another did utilize the time during the session to have their breakfast or lunch. It requires teachers’ attention to understand the amount of break time to be given between classes, asynchronous activities, a number of classes per day a student can attend in a virtual setting. There is also a definite need for schools to understand how they wish to balance the synchronous and asynchronous learning environments. Some of the students did have multiple Gadgets with them like personal computers, smart phones, and a tablet computer, and have logged in using a tablet to attend the class but were playing using the smartphone and use smartphone to check for answers to the questions posed during the class.

(iv) Were you able to collaborate with your peers on learning using phone calls/ WhatsApp/ SMS? Explain

All the students interviewed felt that peer to peer collaboration was the most challenging task as they felt some of the group members were not responding while trying to communicate through email, Phone call/ WhatsApp/SMS. This resulted in either student working on the whole assignment on his/her own or looking for other peers who were willing to cooperate and work with them. They felt looking for a common slot where everyone in a team was available for collaboration apart from the class time was a challenging task. Most of the students felt the lack of collaboration among the peers resulted in submission of poor assignments and consumed more time among students who were initiating to reach out to their peers. Some students shared that, their friends were ignoring the phone calls and messages and not ready to share the responsibility because in a virtual situation nothing much a teacher can do about it. This is a clear breach of learner agency behavior.

(v) Do you think you can achieve goals that are important to you? Explain

Most of the students who were interviewed had a mixed opinion on the achievement of their goal. Some felt they performed academically well in some subjects and were unable to achieve the same in other subjects. Few also felt they would have performed well if they were attending schools and classes in a normal environment and they did prefer learning face to face. Few students did share their dissatisfaction on how they were unable to participate in any extra-curricular activities and hence unable to achieve the goals they had set for themselves. They felt the online teaching environment was mostly academic oriented and had less when it came to extracurricular activities. They felt they are helpless in an online environment to steer their life goals.

(vi) Were you distracted by complex assignments and its completion on time? Explain

Students had a mixed opinion on this question. Most of the students expressed that on a regular basis there were at least three subject assignment submissions all going at the same day which made it challenging for them to give enough time to complete the assignment. Few students felt that whenever they were stuck or were unable to proceed with the assignment, they approached the teacher via email or WhatsApp at times to clarify the doubts and to proceed with the assignment this did delay the process of completing the assignment when their query replies were delayed. They felt difficult to sit back to work on the assignment and it distracted their concentration and zeal to continue to work on the assignment. Some of the students did mention that although the assignments were submitted. They did not receive any constructive feedback which did demotivate them to quite an extent. As it is all happening virtually, some students also took the help of their parents and others in the family. Some even tried to reach out to their classmates to copy their ideas and submitted their friends’ work as theirs. Some of them also mentioned that schools must take care of the amount of assignment workload regularly to avoid over burdening.

(vii) Do you sometimes log in to online class and not present in front of the computer? Explain

Students gave varied encounters to the above question. Most of the students mentioned that they were present during all the class except for the time while they had to use the restroom, or fill their water bottle, or bring materials necessary for the online class. These were some of the excuses they expressed which led them to not to be present in front of the computer. Some students mentioned that on days where they woke up late and could not have breakfast, they did use the class time to have their breakfast, but they used to be present in the online class. Many students did mention that there were essential agreements set by some of the teachers during online classes like keeping the video turned on, Audio to be turned on whenever necessary and so on, and probing questions to students at times. This did encourage students to not just stay in front of the computer but be fully present during the class. But, in classes where there were no essential agreements set by the teacher, it was observed that some of the students did not respond to a question asked or did not turn on their audio or video which also specifies that they were not paying as much attention required by the online classes.

(viii) Do you seek help while answering your online tests from parents or the internet? Elaborate

All the students said they did not seek help while working on an online test. Upon questioning on formative quizzes and tests, there were mixed responses. Some said
no, some said they google immediately and answer, some sought answers from brothers and sisters in the family. Some of them also pretended to be disconnected or not hearing the questions on routine class quizzes. Upon questioning why they took help? They said, they are not seriously getting ready for formative tests as it is a virtual mode there is nothing much teachers can do in this mode to punish them.

(ix) Do you hesitate to clarify doubts in an online class? Elaborate

Most of the students felt comfortable asking questions to teachers personally either by sending an email or by sending a quick question on WhatsApp so on. However, some of the students did make use of the CHATBOX option available on the online platform to post a question or used to raise the hand option for the teacher to respond and if missed by the teacher even there they would reach out to the teacher directly to receive a response and to clarify the doubt. One or two students did mention that they were reluctant to ask questions during the online class as they felt they would be noticed and few others felt lackadaisical.

(x) As you have a few hours of online classes in a day? What do you do in the remaining time? Explain

Most students said they engage in doing home assignments, but upon further questioning some of them said, they are eagerly waiting for the class to get over so that they can play computer games, watch television, browse on social networking sites like Instagram, Facebook etc., and play in the neighborhood.

(xi) If you were asked a question in online class for which you don’t know the answer, what is your response? Elaborate

Almost 50% of the students mentioned that they would respond honestly that they did not know the answer to the question. But few others said that they use google quickly to find a relevant answer to the question posted by the teacher and give answers based on what they read up on google. But upon further asking why you never knew the answer? They said, they did not even reflect on why they couldn’t answer? Have they understood the concepts? Was it taught? They blindly felt guilty for not answering the teachers’ questions.

(xii) Do you think online learning is good enough for your future life? Explain

Students had different perspectives while they answered this question. Few students felt that they were enjoying online classes as they are able to get more time to study and for test preparation. Some felt online learning to be beneficial but did not prefer it on a long run. They did observe, some of the peers not responding to their teachers most of the time during the online class which at times used to be difficult for teachers also that they could not have control on certain students in a virtual environment or to even know if they were involved in the learning process itself. Few students felt online classes lack social interaction either between peer to peer or peers to teacher. Online learning is very individualistic and would benefit the students who are self-driven and ready to take responsibility or ownership of their learning. At the same time, it would be difficult for students with less attention span to concentrate or to utilise online learning in a more constructive manner. Few students were very vocal about how some of the peers in the class would initially misuse the online platform by muting the teacher, or removing a student from a class and so on. However, as the school made an informed decision to move from Zoom to Microsoft Teams, many of these aspects were taken care of. Syllabus completion in the given period of time was also one of the concerns that students think it will be challenging to completely lecture or teach those subjects. However, they also understand that online class is not just about lecture methods. This also opens more questions directing teachers to explore pedagogies that are more relevant to an online learning environment and mindfully include students’ voice and choice in the learning process.

(xiii) Do you think the online teaching, learning materials, and assessments are meaningful to your learning? Explain

Some students mentioned that, when application type questions were asked during class quizzes, they felt it was not being taught. Certain videos shown during classes are not exactly as per the concept to be learned. In some of the test evaluations, the teacher could not give feedback to all the mistakes, some mistakes mentioned were not very satisfying to the student due to virtual set up. This has led students to think, online learning is little vague when compared with face to face teaching-learning.

(xiv) Do you think you miss your teachers recognizing your work in online mode? Explain

Almost all the students said that teachers cannot reach out to all students in a class as it will take more time. Same students are active in most of the classes and passive students remain passive mostly in classes and teachers and friends are not sure what is going on with them? Some of the students did mention that it was difficult for them to learn some of the subjects completely online like Sciences (Physics, Chemistry, & Biology) especially while working on experiments they did mention that they were missing the firsthand experience associated with learning these subjects. They had a vague understanding of these skills and were unsure of using them in real-life situations.

Section 2: Deviance from learner agency

From the above discussions following deviances from learner agency were observed by the researcher. Students are found to be not punctual to their classes and also onto their daily routines. They took online teaching as temporary status and were casual in their approach to learning and working on their assignment. They were
found multitasking during the online classes. They were not satisfied with the teacher feedback and thereby felt their work was unnoticed and lost faith in online teaching and learning. They even took advantage of virtual setup to find answers to the formative questions by other means. They also found themselves hesitant to ask questions as they were not confident of receiving a satisfactory answer to their questions. They were playful and mischievous in some classes. They were playing and spent time aimlessly during their free time. The above discussion clearly indicates the deviance from the learner agency. The researcher has come up with a word cloud on deviance from learner agency and is shown in figure 2.

Figure 2. Showing the word cloud on deviance from learner agency

Examining learner agency in online teaching-learning environment has helped to bring out the following suggestions to the stakeholders; conducting an orientation to students by sharing the essential classroom agreements, their roles and responsibilities, steps for setting a home work station, expectations during the online (synchronous classes), and a time table for asynchronous activities for out of class hours are vital needs that have to be paid attention by the teachers and school heads. Having parents in confidence, schools may also inform parents on the basic requirements, support, and monitoring which will be required to ensure students make the most out of it. Teachers and parents must act as co-agents to support teaching and learning of their wards.

4. Conclusions

The present study was able to identify the changes in the learner agency of upper primary school children of the age ranging from 10 to 13 years due to the online teaching-learning environment. The changes observed can be detrimental to the individual in building up a successful career and to lead a quality life. Therefore, there is a need for teachers that have co-agent to provide positive intervention when they identify unhealthy changes of learner agency because of the online teaching-learning environment. Teachers as co-agent may help children in understanding their roles and responsibilities as learner agents and also guide parents if possible to provide timely advice to their wards in minding their responsibilities. As later childhood is a part of the learner agency formation stage, there is a need for the stakeholders to understand the context of learner agency and to act rationally and responsibly towards it.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

All the three authors of the present study declare that there is no conflict of interest pertaining to this study and have arrived at a consensus to decide on the corresponding author.

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Examining Learner Agency in Online Teaching

6516

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