Crafts Education and Rhizomatic Learning during COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to every aspect of life including educational practices. This has necessitated a systemic transition from traditional face-to-face modes of pedagogy to online teaching. With the module Craft Research and Documentation as a backdrop, this article discusses a pedagogical improvisation employed to study the lived experiences and traditional handcrafting practices involved in creating signature Bagru and Dabu textiles by the *Chhipa* community in Bagru, Rajasthan. This required the educators to envision ways of facilitating opportunities for the students to vicariously experience the realities in artisanal clusters. Aimed at understanding the nature of learning in alternative pedagogical approaches, this article draws primarily from the work of French postmodern theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) on rhizomatic learning to examine the extent to which online teaching and learning can substitute for face-to-face teaching-learning modes. Initially propounded as a post-structural approach to education, the theory of rhizomatic learning has more recently been identified as a methodology for internet-enabled education. In this article, a case study of adaptive pedagogies is presented to evaluate the nature of learning emerging from the interplay of actors in these online artisanal spaces. Observation of the diverse responses emerging from students' subjective learning experiences revealed demonstrated ability among students to harness learning networks and make creative connections across seemingly diverse issues within the craft ecosystem. These issues included recognition of the artisan community as a repository of indigenous knowledge and skills; ecological sustainability and gender; cultural appropriation and copyright; and innovative marketing strategies in the crafts sector. Learners' responses revealed that while online interaction due to COVID constraints may not be equivalent to in-person engagement during on-site visits, an expansion of the pedagogical approach can facilitate envisioning alternative educational structures and processes with unique comparative advantages for rhizomatic knowledge creation**.**

Keywords: Craft education, artisan, online classes, pedagogy, rhizomatic learning

Introduction

With the COVID-19 pandemic causing unprecedented devastation across the globe, countries have centered their efforts on confronting this disruption. The nationwide lockdown in India in 2020 resulted in the closure of all working and learning spaces. The pervasive uncertainty necessitated a quick response to the crisis from educational institutes to re-schedule, improvise and implement adaptive pedagogies. The transition from traditional face-to-face modes of classroom teaching to alternative ways of curriculum transaction saw the emergence of online teaching as the most viable alternative. With content at the core, online learning effectively enables interaction among the instructors and students (Moore, 1989). There is no one-size-fits-all model for online design education, since it not only depends on technology itself, but also on the way it is used (Rocha, Ferreira and Jefferson, 2018). However, the need to re-imagine a new trajectory in fashion education also extends to subjects where on-site visits for survey and ethnographic studies are necessary to achieve the stated course objectives. The challenges of online teaching have been exacerbated where learning outcomes have been required to be culled from experiences beyond the classroom.

The diversity of the handicrafts and handloom sectors is emblematic of India's living traditions. According to official estimates, India is home to 7 million artisans. However, data from unofficial sources indicates that the national artisan strength is as high as 200 million (IBEF, 2021). Yet, people rarely know of those who contribute to the growth of a sector outside tokenized representation or engagement in contemporary conversations. It is important that their voices and perspectives be heard. Design and fashion institutes take on the responsibility of re-centering these perspectives and enabling students to explore other sources of traditional knowledge beyond the classroom, as well as their significance for academia and industry. To this end, the Craft Cluster Initiative—a mandatory subject developed and implemented by National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) which encapsulates in its vision the 'concern for social and human values' and integrates India's craft tradition with the curriculum of all programs to impart 'holistic learning and real-life case studies to students and faculty' (Craft cluster policy[1] of NIFT). This is done by dovetailing fashion education with the regional craft sectors facilitated by each NIFT campus[2]. In undergraduate programs, Craft Research and Documentation (CRD) is a modular subject offered at the end of the second year involving on-site visits to craft clusters. This facilitates experiential insight and sensitization to an environment characterized by regional diversities in terms of culture, aesthetics, natural materials and skilled human resources. Data

assemblages comprise field notes, photographs, audio and visual recordings. This is a prerequisite to the subject Craft based Product Development involving design and prototype development based on applied learning.

However, the pandemic-induced disruption and ensuing lockdown from early 2020 required improvisation in the regular pedagogic approach. It was necessary to take into consideration the learning patterns of Gen Z born in an internet-connected world characterized by multiple learning channels with fast-paced multimedia technology. These learners need to experience their lessons in ways that can enhance cognition through virtual channels of teaching that affect design education (Broadbent and Cross, 2003) and enhances visual forms of learning that emerge from translating sensory experiences to decisions and actions in a task-dependent manner (Kourtzi, 2010). In this case, adaptive transaction of CRD was facilitated in online mode.

The endeavor to unpack the links between location and materiality of craft practices with the purpose of knowledge creation raises two questions. What is the nature of learning when online learning replaces face-to-face teaching and learning modes? Does online viewing of communities of practice provide the same or equivalent insight as experiential learning in shaping the learning outcomes of craft studies? With focus on CRD, it explores answers to these questions through observation of students' responses and learning outcomes resulting from engaging with craft practitioners to study the lived experiences and practices of the latter in online mode.

Methodology

As traditional classroom teaching was not an available option due to the pandemic, online sessions were conducted for three weeks for 44 students of the Fashion Design department who joined the sessions from their homes situated across several states in India and abroad. The batch was divided into 6 groups each comprising 7-8 students focussing on two textile crafts practiced in select clusters of Rajasthan and Gujarat. A Flipped Class strategy was used to increase their engagement by asking them to familiarize themselves with the distinctive visual idiom of the specific crafts. Secondary learning resources such as research papers and articles, and YouTube links were shared prior to the online sessions.

Simultaneously, collaborative networks with other stakeholders were established. The office of Development Commissioner – Handicrafts, Government of India extended support through the services of a nominated field officer to coordinate and facilitate

interaction with the craft practitioners**.** The online sessions were moderated by the educators located in Delhi through online platforms like Google Classroom, Google Meet and Zoom. The initial two weeks included, *inter alia*, presentations by experts of Weavers Service Center, industry practitioners and faculty members of NIFT, New Delhi. Artisan entrepreneurs gave experiential talks and also guided the students on online tours of the cluster locale sharing narratives of their practices, achievements and market forays. Thus, the cluster became the classroom where the students could view the interactions between the field expert and artisans through the cell phone camera of the facilitator and ask questions in video conference mode. This was followed by self-study, focus group discussions with department mentors, documentation and presentations by each group.

A case study of hand block-printed Bagru and the mud-resist Dabu textiles practiced in Bagru[3] – a town in Rajasthan, is presented as a point of reference to discuss the pedagogy and learning outcomes observed among a group of 7 students. An attempted re-creation of experiential conditions is essential to facilitate the construction of dynamic knowledge among learners. Through participant observation of the students' questions and ensuing discussions, the endeavor was to understand the nature and focus areas of their learning. This approach draws from the theory of French postmodern theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) on rhizomatic learning in their seminal book 'A Thousand Plateaus'. Departing from the traditional representation of knowledge creation as a branching tree, rhizomatic knowledge construction relies on the metaphor of the rhizome, a plant where the stems and roots spread without a beginning or end. This form of knowledge construction takes exploratory routes to seek multiple, inter-related connections among ideas. Initially propounded as a post-structural approach to education, learning in the 21st century is also called Learning 3.0, pointing to learning in a Web 3.0 environment (Rubens, Kaplan and Okamoto, 2014). In this approach, while the educator is responsible for facilitating curricular engagement, the observation of students' responses, whether in-person or online, is critical. It bears mention, however, that this approach is inherently subjective insofar as the inferences and interpretations drawn are contingent upon the educator's positionality and worldview. In this case, the metaphor of the rhizome provides a conceptual tool to evaluate students' learning and trace the nexus of subjects and factors addressed over the course of the CRD module. Just as the spontaneous connection of each rhizomatic node to several others creates a multi-dimensional assemblage in a self-driven process, the connections between students' responses and the subject matter can be traced by analyzing their language,

expressions, enunciation and pauses, which can all be considered meaningful and indicative of their state of mind.

Observed Communities of Practice

Introductory sessions began with the history and location of the printers comprising 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998) in Bagru. The eponymous resist-dyed and block printed fabrics are produced by an estimated 200 families of the *Chhipa* community. The artisans explained the etymology of 'chhipa' deriving from *chhaap* (to print). Oral history traces Bagru printing back to almost five centuries when the *Chhipa* initially settled along the Sānjariya river banks where they discovered the ideal clay which is an essential ingredient of the typical mud-resist Dabu printing technique. Today, Bagru is home to communities specializing in different skill professions — *kharaodi* (blockmaker), *dhobi* (launderer), *rangrez* (dyer) and *chhipa* (printer) who create the signature textiles through interconnected and interdependent systems of work.

Recipient of the National Award in 2011, Suraj Narain Titanwala is a fourth-generation block printer who learnt the craft from his father, Govind Narain. His illustrious career began with visits to the *hatthwada* (local market) with his father to sell block-printed textiles. His skills were noticed by the Japanese textile designer Hiroko Iwatate who extended an invitation in 1982 to conduct printing demonstrations at the Folk Textile Museum in Tokyo. This experience, reinforced by the establishment of the Anokhi textile museum at Amber in 2003 was the genesis of his ambition to build a textile gallery. In 2012 along with his son Deepak Kumar Chippa, he commercialization and constructed the Titanwala Museum in the basement of their family home as an indigenous cultural showcase to preserve the textile heritage of the family and the *Chhipa* community of Bagru. It houses a curated collection encapsulating unique characteristics of the local block printing tradition. During the online CRD session, panning movements of his cellphone revealed valued family heirlooms comprising ancestral vessels, tools, printing blocks and fabric samples displaying sequential dyeing processes and photographs showing vignettes of their professional achievements. Inaugurated in 2019 by the former Union Minister of Textiles, Smt. Smriti Irani, the museum is a reference point for design students and textile enthusiasts.

The ambience of the museum extends to the workshop within the premises. During the online interaction, Deepak Kumar would thoughtfully pause and use his phone camera to show the ongoing Dabu printing process. Etymologically derived from *dabana* (to press down), it involves a sequence of mordanting, stamping and dyeing processes.

Prior to the pandemic during on-site visits the students could try their hand at dyeing and printing processes. As this was not possible online, step-by-step demonstrations of the intricacies of the hand printing process in conjunction with explanations by the artisans provided the closest possible re-creation of experiential learning.

The artisans emphasized that in spite of commercial constraints that have brought changes in the production system, they make consistent efforts to maintain the traditional legacy of materials and processes associated with the heritage of Bagru and Dabu prints. The Titanwala family claims to be the only one to continue with the languishing craft of *Pharadh*[8] printing and among the few remaining practitioners of the *Chilaney ki booti*[9] printing techniques. Yet there are concerns of increased consumer reticence to spend on authentic techniques and materials. This has resulted in the increased use of synthetic dyes even though the printing processes continue to be traditional. The fallout of diminishing demand is that younger artisans have been retreating from their ancestral occupation. India loses on average 10 percent of its artisans every year because their livelihoods are no longer sustainable (South Asia Institute, 2017). Gauging the magnitude and far-reaching implications of this problem, and committed to the preservation of community traditions through continued practices, Titanwala offers novices from the Chhipa and other communities with opportunities to use his workshop bi-annually, as a training center for about two months. Progress of the training schedule in groups of ten participants is closely monitored in order to identify potentially talented people, who are then paid a daily stipend of fifty rupees to incentivise them to continue in this profession. This endeavor has seen young practitioners gradually re-enter the profession which, in turn, rejuvenates community resilience (Deepak Kumar Chhipa, personal communication, August 2021). The progressive attitude of the Titanwala family is also evidenced in their encouragement of women in the community by offering equal opportunities to enrol in the training center. Classes are scheduled according to the convenience of the women after completion of their *dincharya*[10] activities. Titanwala has also requested the state government for recognition and certification of the training program to further encourage community participation.

Learning Outcomes of Online Sessions

Social anthropologist Jean Lave states that “learning is changing participation as part of changing social practice, when participants engage with each other in a social-historical world. Knowledge is constructed and modified in use.” (Lave, 1996, p.156).

The responses of the printers reinforced this view, as well as that of educational theorist and practitioner, Etienne Wenger that learning takes place through "modified forms of participation that are structured to open the practice to non-members" and that peripherality provides the means of participating in actual practice (Wenger, 1998, p.100). During the pandemic, the conventional educational model with a linear mode of expert-centered pedagogy has moved towards social constructivism, a theory of knowledge propounded by Lev Vygotsky, according to which human development is socially situated and knowledge is constructed through interaction with others. This connects to the theory of rhizomatic learning wherein learning can be mapped, but not traced […] and is drawn through experimentation with the real (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.12). The theory draws on the metaphor of a rhizomatic plant, which is a mass of internal connections linking one point to any other point, a characteristic that promotes active growth in any and all directions, with each point also closely connected to the environment. Each of its "semi-independent nodes […] is capable of growing and spreading on its own, bounded only by the limits of its habitat" (Wheeler quoted by Cormier, 2008).

Students' learning can be understood through this metaphor. Because operational and pedagogical approaches during the CRD sessions were kept relatively informal, this allowed for spontaneous, exploratory approaches by the students to imbibe new information and construct dynamic learning outcomes on an individual basis. The trajectory of their comments revealed a shift from more cursory aesthetic evaluations to thoughts encompassing a wider, deeper and more complex perspective of the crafts sector. These inputs from the students during their CRD experience, as well as the rhizomatic learning outcomes they derived from it, are elaborated and discussed below.

Artisan as repository of community knowledge

Secondary research undertaken by the students revealed that the Dabu printing tradition is also practiced by the Chhipa who had migrated from Sawai Madhopur in Alwar, Rajasthan and settled in Akola, Chittorgarh district near Udaipur, Rajasthan. This data was supplemented by the artisans' recollections and information on additional settlements[11]as important sources of primary data. As a doyen of the community and repository of local wisdom, knowledge and skills of Bagru and Dabu block printing, Suraj Narain Titanwala is committed to keeping ancestral traditions alive, even in the face of threats of mill-made fabrics that emerged in the 1970s. The deep respect that Deepak Kumar has for his father was evident in most of his sentences that began with

the words that translate to “My father says that […]”. A student commented that this seems to be in consonance with the ancient *Guru-shishya Parampara*[12]. Till date, a father or an elder in the crafts community evokes similar reverence as a *guru*/teacher as a fountainhead of knowledge.

Hindi is the official language[13] of India in Devanagari script as articulated in Article 343 of the Indian constitution. NIFT students come from different Indian states each with its predominant language of use and usually study in English medium schools, an outcome of British colonization. There is increasing use of English by Gen Z as the language of the internet but not of the indigenous languages of India. However, communication with artisans who speak in Hindi interspersed with vernacular words when referring to local materials and processes, necessitated students to write these words phonetically and translate these to English. They also browsed online sources extensively to find botanical names of trees and local ingredients. These bilingual words and phrases were recorded in their learning diaries as a co-requisite to formal documentation. This process facilitated the bridging of two distinct lived worlds.

In addition to the Iwatate Textile Museum in Tokyo, the students found online references to Titanwala’s work exhibited in the Anokhi Museum in Jaipur. Admiration for the initiative of father-son duo in setting up the Titanwala Museum was expressed in the comment of student A:

> It must have been really challenging to build this museum using their own funds without any official support. So much zeal to preserve the history of the family and the community… Seeing it in person would be like a textile encyclopaedia coming alive!

Museums present authentic objects to provide ‘a context through visual and material experiences’ (Melchior, 2014, p.14). Fabrics communicate, and therefore have both relevance and an appeal that translates into the capacity to generate higher footfall of visitors across broader demographics. The student’s comment pointed to an appreciation and acknowledgement among students of the significance of indigenous curation in preserving and nurturing local textile traditions in artisanal museums located far from urban milieus, and the tenacity of community elders as knowledge repositories upholding ancestral textile production systems.

Crafts community, sustainability, water crisis and gender

There were discussions on the acute problem of water scarcity in Rajasthan due to erratic rainfall patterns induced by climate change which has resulted in decreasing

water resources that aquifers are unable to replenish naturally, hence creating an over dependence on groundwater. Sparse rainfall increases the reliance of smaller textile units on wells and the need to drill borewells that give *khārā pani* (brine) that can be used only for dyeing, printing and washing requirements. In the organized Textile Parks of the Jaipur Bloc, the established fabric exporters have water harvesting facilities but also have large machines where repeated washing cycles consume high amounts of water. While the disposal modes of chemical effluents from larger industrial textile units pollute the soil and pose serious environmental concerns, craftspersons and artisans have a deep sense of ecological literacy regarding natural materials, processes of making and disposal. As with traditional communities, the *chhipa* engaged in Bagru printing as well as the supply chain of both material and human resources, operate within a small radius of the local environment. This is in sync with the concept of 'localism' that involves the local adaptation of knowledge, products, cultures and practices (Fletcher and Grose, 2012). As concerns around sustainability are gaining traction in conversations on commercially manufactured textiles and fashion, traditional handloom and handicrafts sectors are facing increasing difficulties in practicing their trade according to its inherent tenets. There are periods when the work ceases due to lack of water. The challenge is to search for ways in which the local artisans and craftspersons can be supported when their livelihoods are impacted by adverse climatic conditions.

In discussions following the CRD interaction, students recalled the water recycling system installed on the Titanwala workshop premises where wastewater produced during the printing processes is channelled into a tank where it is filtered and then flows to the tube well which supplies water used for irrigating the land. Just as rhizomes are connected not only internally but also with the environment, the ensuing discussion revealed an emerging understanding among students of the craft ecosystem as embedded in an overarching nexus of factors including resource scarcity, gender, culture and social norms. The discussion veered to the strongly demarcated gendered roles and practices in many parts of India, with focus on the roles of women and young girls in rural households who are responsible for collecting and transporting water, often walking long distances in sweltering heat. This daily chore restricts education of the girl child as she is either engaged in collecting water or taking care of the home and her siblings when her mother is away collecting water. Student B commented on the roles of women:

> Generally, it's so difficult for women to balance their household responsibilities including collecting water, taking care of the family and children, assisting

> their husbands with farming, spinning and dyeing…yet they are largely in the background.

Iterating the similar positionality of women in rural and urban India, student C added:

> Even in cities, women bear the responsibility of collecting water for their daily needs. Queueing up for municipal water supply before the break of dawn, they are sleep-deprived which affects their productivity.

However, student D reminded others of exceptions such as the encouragement of women by the Titanwala family through learning opportunities about printing skills, relating this to efforts of self-determination within the community. This association was aligned to the concept of understanding 'community beingness' (Walkerdine, 2016) as relationality, producing meanings and affects held in common.

Cultural appropriation of crafts

During demonstrations of the printing process, Deepak Kumar pointed to a particular textile print being developed for a foreign buyer. He emphasized that though some additional yardage is printed for the client in case the need arises, these are never sold locally as "this would be a breach of professional ethics" (translated from Hindi by the author). Deliberations veered to issues of cultural appropriation, plagiarism and copyright in the crafts sector. This was with reference to a legal notice served in 2020 for the use of the word 'Bagru' on textile products made by Ramkishore Derewala, an artisan of the *Chhipa* community and recipient of the national Padma Shri award for distinguished service. The notice was served by a businessman who had registered 'Bagru' as his trademark in 2008 under the Trademarks Act 1999 (Craft Village, 2020). The artisans of Bagru have now countered the claim, stating that Bagru prints had received the Geographical Indication (GI) certificate in 2009. As Bagru is a cultural tag with connotations of tradition and heritage, students were asked for their opinion on the matter. Brainstorming sessions and systematic online searches yielded references to the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999 that prohibits the registration of GI as a Trade Mark. A provision in Chapter V on 'Prohibition of Registration of Geographical Indication as Trade Mark'[14] of this Act states that the registration of a trade mark can be refused or invalidated if it contains or consists of GI identifying certain notified goods. The discussion extended from this specific case to the general need to protect traditional knowledge and the skill techniques of local communities comprising their cultural repertoire and authentic forms of expression. The argument for 'regulations concerning craft and textiles as protected national

property' and that 'rising interest in copyright and craft needs to be seen not only in light of growing visibility and marketability [….] but also in terms of the positioning of intellectual property as an increasingly important economic strategy' is a global issue (Robertson, 2010). Moreover, with technology and the high speed of production in the powerloom industry, the replication of traditional designs has become easier as digitized prints overwhelm the market. This obfuscates the identification of genuine handcrafted textiles.

During the ensuing focus group discussions, students' rhizome-like comments on diverse aspects seemed akin to a lateral network of connections branching out organically to form new assemblages. Online sessions allowed them to Google related information simultaneously during the focus group discussions. Student D articulated the irony of the situation:

> Though Bagru and Dabu prints are examples of very distinctive patterns of India, they face challenges of sustenance because of their very popularity, largely due to plagiarism.

Based on a quick online search, student E excitedly referred to the case of plagiarism alleged by People Tree[15]— a small-scale fair trade fashion brand that had earlier developed the 'Yogi print' hand block-printed in Rajasthan, against international brand Christian Dior in 2018, and their subsequent out-of-court settlement with a non-disclosure agreement. The student added:

> Thanks to social media that plays such an important role in calling out cases of plagiarism, small scale design brands now have avenues of redressal against injustice. It is essential for artisans and design students to know more about IPR and copyright laws.

Evident in this example was an unexpected but undeniable advantage that online learning holds over face-to-face teaching and learning. While the digital medium deprived students of some of the visual-tactile experience of engaging with the craftspersons, immediate access to the internet allowed them to engage with the curriculum in ways that in-person learning could not facilitate as easily. It encouraged and enabled richer questions based on online searches driven entirely by individual curiosity and takeaways from the content of the online interactions.

Marketing strategies in the crafts sector

The second largest source of livelihood after agriculture, the combined handloom and handicraft sector is a vehicle of Indian heritage, culture and identity representing the

wealth of knowledge and skills honed over centuries. Brainstorming possible ways of increasing the income of artisans and craftspersons ensued with analysis of the reasons underpinning the ailing crafts sector. As assimilation of crafts and fashion is one of the objectives of CRD, cases of successful interaction between fashion designers and retail brands with the artisan community were discussed. While brands such as Fabindia, Anokhi, Soma, Aavaran and Antaran have successfully leveraged crafts for their businesses, the handcrafting sector continues to face crises as markets for machine-made products gain a competitive edge over those for handcrafted items.

Focus group discussions included possible ways of rejuvenating this sector and sustaining the livelihoods of its practicing artisan communities for their socio-economic betterment. Case study analyzes of successful enterprises and networks of organizations with a common vision and purpose, were undertaken. Students were unanimous that solutions require balance between adherence to the original craft heritage on the one hand and appeal to a modern consumer on the other. Rhizomatic learning was reflected in the diversity of solutions and innovative marketing suggestions that emerged in students' thinking processes. Some felt that narratives of the crafts sector could be extended by leveraging the considerable reach and influence of social media to repurpose traditional content and broaden news coverage to engage wider audiences. Another suggestion was to leverage the phenomenon of celebrity culture so that textile crafts can be 'glamorized' by the association of a genuifluencer[16] or Bollywood star. Student F wondered:

> Can storytelling be considered as a marketing tool to create an emotional connection with consumers…to inform them about the individual and community of craft producers and regions of production?

Student D suggested a different route where a marketing strategy could be developed to make the crafts sector an attractive business proposition for investments. This aligns with the opinions of Somesh Singh[17], co-founder of Craft Village who iterated the need to replace the altruistic, not-for-profit approach usually used in the context of crafts in favor of positioning high quality handmade crafts in a niche segment that can command higher prices, and thereby facilitate higher profitability for the artisans and craftspersons.

It was also observed that student G had been silently listening to the discussions, nodding his head slowly with an air of introspection and thoughtfulness. The learner expressed a state of insight by the statement:

> This (CRD) has been nothing like what I have ever experienced. It is completely out of the ordinary...

The sentence petering into silence contained depth and inexpressible emotion. The silence was not just an empty pause but seemed indicative of a state of mind that was still processing the expanse of the online CRD experience and attempting to communicate something beyond verbal expression.

Indeed, students' learnings from the sessions were as much affective as they were substantive. After completion of the module, they expressed an appreciation for the human networks that facilitated online accessibility and personally contacted the artisans to express gratitude for their time and generosity in sharing their experiences. Many mentioned looking forward to the subject 'Craft-Based Product Development' offered after two semesters, which includes developing a collection based on the studied textile or craft product.

Substantively, students' learnings from the sessions were diverse not only in traversing a range of areas but also in exploring varied viewpoints within each one. Their insights, questions and opinions on the subject of one particular handicraft spanned culture, tradition, indigenous knowledge, sustainability, gender, intellectual property, marketing, capital and media. For many of these areas, multiple perspectives were considered by students, for example with social media and celebrity influence being two distinct avenues to bolster public engagement with the crafts sector.

Students' individual comments, group discussions, learning diaries and final documents indicated their deepening interest in the ethos of the traditional handcrafted textile sector, albeit from the periphery of physical involvement. Their observations revealed an increasing nuance and sensitivity in their understanding of the web of factors influencing the lives and livelihoods of the craftspersons. For instance, their initial comments on Dabu and Bagru prints at the start of the online sessions were based on a rudimentary appreciation of the craft evident in statements such as "these are nice prints" and "the craftspeople are so skilled". Continued online interactions and subsequent focus group discussions segued into a multiplicity of issues, with a more complex and informed perspective of the crafts sector and its cultural position in India and beyond. As discussed above, their comments following the interaction reflected a respectful understanding of the tenacity of craft communities to continue with their work even during these difficult times, and the challenges of livelihood sustenance.

Conclusion

Addressing the impact of COVID-19 on education has necessitated the reconsideration of several academic conventions and entrenched curriculum paths. For educators, understanding the learning patterns of Gen Z necessitates re-envisioning new routes to teaching by incorporating alternative pedagogies that have not been extensively used earlier**.** The objectives of this article were to understand and illustrate the nature of learning when face-to-face teaching-learning modes are substituted by online learning, and to ascertain whether this substitution provides the same or equivalent insight as experiential learning in craft studies. For this purpose, it was necessary to facilitate a context in which knowledge could be constructed by students in a dynamic manner**.** Observations of students' responses during and after online interactions with the artisans encompassing the intensities and embodied practices of everyday life within the cluster milieu indicated that in spite of being relatively circumscribed by pandemic-imposed constraints, they were able to harness learning networks to capture and interpret the sensorial qualities of the audio-visual data generated in an online mode, thereby demonstrating the ability to make organic connections across seemingly diverse issues within the cluster ecosystem. This multitudinous engagement with the world of the craftspersons aligns with the view of educationist Peter C. Murell Jr. that academic goals are achieved when learning is understood as the acquisition of a set of preferred cultural practices leading to the 'socialization of these cultural practices in educational settings' (Murrell, 2007, p.34).

In keeping with Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the rhizome which morphs, redirects itself and moves in multiple directions at once, comments by the students during focus group discussions indicated an ability to form connections between seemingly unrelated topics that broadly included the artisan as an embodied repository of community knowledge; cultural appropriation and copyright issues; the water crisis and gender issues; and innovative marketing strategies to rejuvenate the sector. Just as a rhizome resists any defined structure in forming a lateral network of nodes, students were able to draw on online stimuli to construct knowledge and form connections across distinct areas in a boundless exploration of ideas. Thus, while online interactions may not be equivalent to in-person engagement during on-site visits, they are a close re-creation of experiential learning and can foster the derivation and expression of subjective insights indicative of self-directed rhizomatic learning**.**

Equally, it was also evident that the digital mode brought concomitant benefits that rendered it superior to face-to-face teaching and learning in particular ways. The loss

of tactile and physical experience was compensated for by an additional avenue for parallel research during the interaction which enriched their engagement with the subject matter and facilitated curiosity-driven engagement in a way that a purely physical environment couldn't. Thus, while the craftspersons served as one node of the rhizome from which students derived learning, the digital medium itself became a dynamic source of rhizomatic learning that could be drawn upon according to the subjective insights and engagement of individual students with the craftspersons' inputs. Herein lies the opportunity for education systems, and the concluding provocation for all the educators grappling to uphold them in the era of COVID-19. The digital mode of teaching and learning—even if resulting from circumstantial constraints, holds far more potential when understood as a valuable, albeit atypical, learning opportunity offering students a unique and diverse range of insights into the subject matter, rather than in terms of its constraints and deprivations.

In fact, rather than evaluating online education as an analogous or impoverished alternative to in-person learning, the former might instead be viewed as one of several possible alternatives, each with its embedded advantages and potential to foster non-linear learning. To draw differently on the metaphor of the rhizome, just as one source of input (the craftsperson) spurred varied and evolving learning outcomes for the students in this article, educators might draw on a single circumstantial limitation (COVID-19) as a call to envision the shift to digital means as one of several possible pedagogical transformations to enrich, strengthen and reimagine conventional educational processes. Thus, an externally-necessitated move to a new mode of learning could open the doorway to a multiplicity of pedagogic pathways, encouraging educators to imagine myriad ways in which students might engage with a given curriculum. This suggestion transcends a concern with the replicability of learning models or outcomes, focusing instead on the rhizomatic growth of learning modes, the specific comparative advantages of each, and the distinct forms of agency they afford to stakeholders in the learning process. In conclusion, with a definitive end to the global disruption nowhere in sight, structures of systemic education need to re-envision and reframe pedagogies and evaluation parameters to facilitate reflective and rhizomatic thinking processes. Moreover, doing so in an exploratory spirit seeking to expand the pedagogical imagination could serve to fortify and reinvigorate an education system in recovery from being plunged into a state of foundational flux.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank the reviewer for the valuable comments and suggestions.

Notes

1. Craft Cluster, https://nift.ac.in/cluster-projects
2. NIFT has 17 campuses — New Delhi, Chennai, Gandhinagar, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Bhopal, Bhubaneswar, Jodhpur, Kangra, Kannur, Patna, Raebareli and Shillong, Srinagar and Panchkula.
3. According to Census of India 2011, the total population of Bagru is 31,229 out of which 16,259 are male and 14,970 are female. The average sex ratio is 921 as compared to 928 which is the average of Rajasthan state**.**
4. *Sheesham* (*Dalbergia sissoo*), *saagwan* (*Tectona grandis*), *gurjan* (*Dipterocarpus turkinatus*), and *rohida* (*Tecomella undulata*)
5. Materials used in printing include powdered *harda*/Myrobalan (*Terminalia chebula*) as mordant, powdered *begar* (red) paste with *gond* (Acacia arabica gum), *lal mitti* (reddish soil) and *phitkari* (alum).
6. The fabric base is pre-treated with a viscous paste made of *kali mitti* (dark clay soil), *beedan* (moth-eaten wheat powder) and *gond*.
7. Natural and organic dyes include blue from the indigo plant (*Indigofera tinctoria*), grey from powdered ferrous sulphate and myrobalan (*Terminalia chebula*), *syahi* (black) from a mixture of iron, jaggery and powdered seed of *imli* (*Tamarindus indica*), and yellow from a mixture of pomegranate (*Punica granatum*) and turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) powder.
8. Printing technique involving the intricate use of 25 patterns of wood printing blocks.
9. Printing technique with delicate prints outlined in black on red *gadhh* fabric base, once made exclusively for a new bride.
10. Daily routine
11. There are *Chhipa* communities in Barmer, Jahota village in Ambar *tehsil* of Jaipur district, Kaladera village in Chomu *tehsil* and Jairampura village near Chomu. Some *chippa* are also located in Kachchh, Bhuj district of Gujarat.
12. A Vedic tradition wherein learning transmitted from the teacher to the disciple in a residential gurukul.
13. The Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999 - No. 48 of 1999

14. The 2011 Census of India indicates that most people speak one of the 22 scheduled languages including Hindi while there are 9,500 languages or dialects spoken as mother tongues.

15. People Tree reaches settlement with Christian Dior over use of yogi artwork. Available from https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/people-tree-reaches-settlement-with-christian-dior-over-use-of-yogi-artwork/articleshow/64357013.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst. [Accessed 12 Aug 2021].

16. Social media stars who use their platforms beyond product placement to disseminate information with authenticity and transparency.

17. Panellist in the webinar 'India@75: Leveraging India's Textile Heritage for Leadership', 14 August 2021.

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