THE Sanskritized Hindi acronym SWAYAM stands for Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds. SWAYAM is a type of Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) platform offered by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Govt of India, technically supported through a subsidiary of Microsoft Corporation, USA.

Correspondence courses are often offered by open universities such as IGNOU or distance education wing of a number of universities. MOOCs are a very similar concept; instead of postal correspondence with the university faculty, students access the course materials (teaching video, lecture handouts, books, assignments, etc.) through the internet free of charge. If you pay a nominal fee and pass the examination, you can even get recognised course certification from the university offering the MOOC. SWAYAM offers only individual courses, not whole degrees or diplomas. SWAYAM is accessible through https://swayam.gov.in or through an Android App available at Google Play.

A major advantage of MOOC is that it lets a student take classes from leading faculties from top-ranking universities even if the student could not manage to get admission there. SWAYAM typically offers courses by faculties from Central Universities, IITs, IIMs, IISERs, etc. Physical enrolment in these institutes is severely restricted by highly competitive national-level entrance tests like JEE, CUCET, CAT, etc.

Even if you couldn’t qualify CUCET for instance, SWAYAM lets you take courses from faculties at Central Universities, free of charge. In one sense, SWAYAM opens...
up the “cloistered academic hegemony” and makes the high-quality courses accessible to anyone disrespecting their economic status, educational level, gender, nationality, caste, religion, etc. bringing in an egalitarian, socialistic approach to the education sector.

There are no entrance tests for SWAYAM courses; all courses are open to all. As a MOOC, SWAYAM has several advantages. The student can access courses from anywhere (while travelling in a bus, at night, while having meals, etc.); this is convenient for those who have jobs, parents on maternity/paternity leaves and so on.

In comparison with traditional ‘brick-and-mortar’ classroom instruction, MOOC lets the students watch the class video as many times as they like. This is important while learning new concepts, as studies have affirmed that frequency of revision plays a crucial role in etching the concepts in our long-term memory. Students can pause the class to take notes and rewind/forward as they may prefer.

However, a disadvantage of MOOC is that it demands a computer or smartphone with internet connection. As mobiles and internet connections are becoming more affordable to all socioeconomic sections, the impact of this disadvantage is expected to abate in the near future.

MOOC is an example of two-way learning. As in a traditional classroom, students can pose questions to the teacher and can get their doubts cleared online. Students can also interact with other students through discussion forums. In contrast, in one-way learning (or self-learning) the students access contents only, without any interaction, for example, DD GyanDarshan, YouTube, TED, Radio, TV, a textbook, etc.

Another example of one-way learning is e-PG Pathshala – a precursor of SWAYAM. Students can check out e-PG Pathshala portal (https://epgp.inflibnet.ac.in) and access contents of thousands of courses offered there. A disadvantage of e-PG Pathshala is that as it is one-way learning, students cannot interact with other students or with the teacher. Contents at e-PG Pathshala is now also being converted ('repurposed') to SWAYAM courses for this reason.

The major MOOC providers in the world are edX (www.edx.org), Coursera (https://www.coursera.org), Udacity (https://www.udacity.com) and Khan Academy (https://www.khanacademy.org). Anyone anywhere in the world can enrol into the thousands of courses accessible through these websites free of charge. Courses include those taught by faculties from top-ranking ivy-league universities, including Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, MIT, Cambridge, Oxford and so on. If you pay a nominal fee and pass online examinations, you will get official course certificates from those universities. For instance, an MSc student from a local college in Kerala would like to take Mathematical Biology course, which is not offered in her college. She can enrol this course offered by the University of California, Berkeley, the USA through Coursera. If she pays a fee and passes online tests of the course, she can earn course transcript from UC Berkeley. However, course certificates from foreign universities cannot be used as part of the degrees from Indian Universities.

SWAYAM becomes relevant in such situations as it offers credit transfers across all universities and institutes pan India. All courses offered through SWAYAM are fully recognised by the government of India and are valid in the country, which is a major advantage. As per the recent circulars from UGC, all universities in the country should have at least 10% of total courses offered from approved SWAYAM courses.

SWAYAM courses typically have four components called ‘quadrants’. The first is teaching content which could include teaching video, PowerPoint presentation, animation, video of blackboard teaching, podcast (recorded audio), screencast, interviews and so on. All these depend on the concerned subject and the pedagogical strategy adopted by the teacher. This component also includes e-text, which is a self-explanatory text material or lecture handout comprehensively covering the subject matter.

The second quadrant is references or further learning resources, which typically is a webpage with curated hyperlinks to relevant quality contents across the internet.

The third quadrant is the discussion forum, which is a webpage where students can interact with one another and pose questions. The fourth quadrant is assessment, which could be quizzes, descriptive examination, assignments, term-paper, etc.

There are two types of assessments, ungraded and graded. A student earns 20% of the total marks through graded tests and graded assignments accessed and submitted entirely online.
can attempt these online tests from anywhere, for instance at home. The other 80% of total marks is earned through proctored examination at select centres across India through a mechanism in collaboration with IGNOU.

Similar to classroom courses that are divided into various units, SWAYAM courses are divided into various modules. Each module covers a section of the syllabus. A module consists of 40 minutes of video, broken into three smaller length videos. Duration of SWAYAM course is usually 15 weeks. The total number of modules in a course depends upon the total credits of the course.

For instance, a 3-credit course will have 30 modules (2 modules per week) while a 4-credit course will have 40 modules. Each week will begin with a brief introductory video of around 2 minutes in duration introducing contents of that specific week. Module videos and assessments of the week will be released on scheduled days. Each week would conclude with a brief sum-up video of around 3 minutes reviewing concepts that are covered in that specific week. Video lectures in all SWAYAM courses have been repurposed by the MHRD to broadcast it via SWAYAM-Prabha TV channels.

There are 32 DTH channels available through SWAYAM Prabha, divided based on subjects. For example, channel 9 covers all life science subjects. SWAYAM Prabha channels are comparable to DD GyanDarshan. However, note that there is no two-way learning. SWAYAM Prabha brings the high-quality contents of SWAYAM over the air to millions of households without internet using GSAT-15 satellite.

The SWAYAM programme is a ‘vertical’; it contains hundreds of courses from grade 9 onwards till post graduation level to suit students from different age groups. While UGC-SWAYAM (to be renamed to HEC-SWAYAM shortly) offers non-technology postgraduate courses, NPTEL-SWAYAM offers technology graduate and postgraduate courses. CEC-SWAYAM offers non-technology undergraduate courses, IGNOU-SWAYAM offers diploma and certification-level courses, and NCERT/NIOS-SWAYAM offers grade 10 and grade 9-level courses.

In addition, courses offered through SWAYAM can be accessed by anyone to improve her/his knowledge as part of the Life-Long Learning philosophy absolutely freely. For example, an unemployed person living in a remote village with no formal education can enrol in computer programming course to learn coding and creating software/apps. For her/him a formal certification and credit transfer might not be important; all it matters is to acquire the knowledge.

SWAYAM, as in any other MOOC, also facilitates the modern pedagogical concept of flip-class (also called hybrid/blended learning) for existing physical classroom teaching. Consider my own classroom teaching at the Central University of Punjab, Bhatinda. I can ask my students to access my MOOC (watching my classes, accessing course materials, etc.) at home/hostel. During the scheduled periods in the classroom, instead of teaching the contents once again, which is now redundant, I would facilitate discussions about the subject, solving their doubts, attempting assignments/‘home’ works. Here, ‘home’ work would have been flipped to ‘class’ work, and the venue of teaching flipped from classes to their homes; thus the name ‘flip class’.

Obviously, it would mean more efforts by the teachers (not merely taking classes but also helping the students to solve assignments, immerse in their discussion, etc.). For the same reason, many teachers are against the idea of adopting flip-class concept in their classes. However, a number of recent studies suggest flip-classes to be more effective than traditional classes.

One reason for this is that the students learn most of the concepts either themselves or from peer-group discussions – a fact established by decades of educational research. While the role of the teacher is limited to facilitating self-learning and peer-group discussions, traditional classrooms over-emphasise teachers; it is more teacher-centric and promotes rote-learning.

Traditional classroom teachings are mostly one-way ‘didactic monologues’ (like preaching in radios) which are an unproductive strategy as confirmed by numerous educational studies. In contrast, flip-classes are student-centric and foster peer-group discussions. As teacher-student one-to-one interaction is far higher, ‘flip-classes’ let the teachers identify the specific weaknesses of individual students and tailor-make her/his teaching strategy to nurture the learning, a concept known as ‘personalised learning’.

The bottom line is that SWAYAM offers unprecedented learning opportunities to crores of people. Enrolling SWAYAM courses are completely free while formal certification requires a nominal fee. Anyone who can access Facebook or WhatsApp on their phones can access high-quality SWAYAM courses offered by faculties from CUs, IITs, IIMs, IISERs etc., opening up quality education to the masses.

So, spend your free time learning something exciting through SWAYAM instead of squandering your precious time on WhatsApp, Facebook, etc. Albert Einstein once said: “Wisdom is not the product of schooling, but of the lifelong attempt to acquire it. Once you stop learning, you start dying.”

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