

Disability no deterrent for these business school teachers: Study

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BENGALURU: Solutions don't come easy when the road ahead is full of hurdles. But nothing seems to be impossible for these B-school teachers who are bringing a cutting edge to their classes despite their physical disabilities.

The stories of these anonymous teachers who have successfully overcome their disabilities have been brought out in a study conducted by Prof Mukta Kulkarni, Mphasis Chair for Digital Accessibility and Inclusion, IIM Bangalore, who has been working on disability issues for the past 13 years.

The study highlights the practices implemented by physically challenged faculty, which are mostly informal and inexpensive. "While there's a great focus on what can be done for students with disabilities, we also need to

address the issues faced by teachers. Apart from permanent disabilities, there can be temporary immobility, confining a person to a wheelchair even if it's for a short period," said Kulkarni.

"After reaching out to more than 20 teachers with severe disabilities across management schools in India, I found that these are people who have worked for a long time with their inadequacies and have emerged victorious. Some are widely recognized for their contributions to the field of teaching. The youngest of them is in mid-40s while the oldest is nearly 70 years old," she added.

HOW TECHNOLOGY COMES TO THEIR HELP

SCROLLS FOR WHEELCHAIR-BOUND

Ever heard of a scroll being used to teach? Yes, an actual scroll is what a professor suffering from severe muscle atrophy uses to teach his human resources students. A huge cloth is used to write key points that he would usually put on a black board. Given his inability to stand, the professor drops the scroll down in front of the class, enabling students to read the highlights of his lecture as he delivers it. What's more interesting about this unique inexpensive technique is that the cloth is washable and reusable.

Another faculty member who teaches accountancy goes a step ahead and colour codes the data written on a similar scroll with the help of his 14-year-old son. Use of a transparent sheet to project data isn't only confined to a meeting room. A professor confined to wheel chair uses thin transparent sheets to write important points during his lecture and project them on to the board. "This projection technique comes for a minimum one-time expense on purchasing a projector and the sheets which aren't expensive," Kulkarni said. Smart board, now an integral part of education, much like the blackboard, has come to aid this 60-year-old professor, a subject of this study, who uses the technological aid to deliver his lectures.

BLIND, BUT IT'S NO HURDLE

A visually impaired professor takes pride in the fact that his informal network is his biggest support. His wife and son help him keep up to date with the current affairs and also accompany him to classrooms. When they are unavailable, he turns to his relatives who are more than willing to spend an hour or two assisting him while he teaches. The informal support also helps keep a check on students during tests and ensures no one cheats. "When there are so many to help you, a solution can easily be found, particularly if post-doctoral and masters' students or even the larger community are leveraged and trained to assist

faculty members with visual impairment," said Kulkarni. The Job Access With Speech (JAWS) computer screen reader is another beneficial and popular aid many teachers have hailed. The reader, which has already made its way into many institutions to aid students with visual impairment, allows users to read a computer screen with text-to-speech output or an electromagnetic braille display.

OPEN SOURCE PORTALS A BOON

Discussions on the open source learning platforms such as Moodle helped a professor leverage his institute's available resource to clarify doubts of students after class. Since his hearing disability gives him little room to understand the queries in class, students use the platform to post their questions to which he responds immediately. All that's needed is either a smartphone or a computer.

Another teacher uses a voice amplifier device which he passes around the classroom to those who would want to raise a doubt. The amplifier works on the same principle of a microphone connected to a loudspeaker.

NEED FOR INFO ON PROFS WITH DISABILITY

Hailing the work being done to address disability and inclusion in Indian institutions and other organizations, Kulkarni said, "One of the striking points that I found during the research was that there's a great need for information on the number of professors teaching with some form of disability in the country."

"This would bring us to the next point on how many zero-cost solutions can be implemented, using these examples. When there is so much being done for students with disabilities, we could do the same for teachers as well," she added.