

How Oxford University Press is bringing technology to the classroom

Stands edutech start-up model on its head, with a focus on content and teachers

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Late last year some 500 teachers in select schools across Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, as part of a pilot programme, began a new journey. What they had in their hand as they taught students was not the ubiquitous textbook but a tablet that contained the entire course material — textbook, work book, question bank, assessment and teacher-lesson plan.

It was yet another exercise by Oxford University Press (OUP), which has been in India for over 100 years and whose books are used by 12,000-plus schools, to leverage technology and thereby improve the quality of education.

Digital reading

OUP, a unit of the Oxford University, has already come out with products such as Oxford Star (a student assessment tool) and Oxford Advantage (a

digitally-enabled integrated learning solution) that leverage technology. It is expected to launch a digital reading programme next month, which will completely displace with text books.

"Technology helps us present a lot more information, engage with students better, tailor teaching more efficiently and offer services such as assessment," OUP's CEO Nigel Portwood told *BusinessLine* while on a recent visit to India. "The challenge before us is how to make the technology work at the right price," he added.

OUP chose to embrace technology in 2015 and since then 10 per cent of its content has so far gone digital. Increasing broadband speeds, falling data costs and affordable devices (smartphones) have only made this transition more compelling in India. Add to this the poor teacher-student ratio. While techno-



Technology helps teachers engage with students better

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logy is seen as a clear disruptor in education, the space has been brutal on those attempting it in India, especially the edutech start-ups. Many of them showed initial promise only to bite the dust later. Will OUP's digital foray be any different?

"Unlike the edutech start-ups which go straight to learners, we keep teachers at the core of our effort," said Sivaramakrishnan V, MD, OUP India. There is another significant difference. "For us, technology is just an enabler. Deep knowledge of the content, pedagogy and relationship with institutions are the key elements that we bring into our products," he added.

In fact, OUP is doing the opposite of what edutech companies have done. "We started with content then added technology," Portwood said.

Ropes in start-ups

OUP has also played to its strength. Technology is not its forte and so it has chosen to partner with start-ups and other players. It works with Report Bee (for smart report cards for schools), Mettl (for Oxford Star) and Excelsoft (for Oxford Advantage). "We are collaborating with our potential disruptors," says Sivaramakrishnan. It is a win-win situation. "We get technology and our partners, the access to the market through our wide reach of schools," he added.

India is also proving to be a test-bed for OUP when it comes to technology. With nine out of ten new users accessing internet on mobile phones, it has launched mobile-friendly versions of both Oxford Star and Oxford Advantage. These innovations are now finding their way into OUP's other markets.