

Unveiling New Vistas: Emerging Academic and Career Opportunities for English Graduates in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

“Doth thee knoweth of any jobs for scholars of English?” is the major question bandied about by all those dealing with the issue of employability of those being trained in English language. The article looks at the emergent careers that have opened new vistas of employment for students of English, taking into account the developments of the Digital Age, its impact on the world markets and its singular focus on language as a Life Skill. The paper attempts to explore the adaptability and resilience of the skills acquired by students of English in order to face the challenges posed by the Digital Age. English as a language and as a discipline faced numerous challenges, several of which seemed to sound its death knell. What sets English as unique from other languages and repeatedly defies its detractors and naysayers is its ability to reinvent itself.

The rise of the Digital Age is far from complete; in fact, it has just begun and the industry is already in the doldrums. The very societies that have been in the forefront of the Information Age are in dire straits with the rise of AI (Artificial Intelligence), which is actually a form of meta-cognition resulting from advanced organic cognition, as suggested by McGowan in a recent article in the *Forbes*. She goes on to predict that more than 120 million individuals would need retraining to be able to function in the job market while the present supply is a mere 20 million. McGowan’s article is strangely silent about the Indian situation, given that it talks about the Chinese, American, Brazilians, Japanese and

Germans. The digital age doomsday article refers to the work of Clay Christensen, who predicts the demise of more than half of the American universities due to the inherent flaws in their latent structure which leaves their students woefully unprepared to face the digital transformation taking place around them.

Assuming that even a part of the story is true, it should definitely be a matter of concern for English language teachers in India. Given the low penetration of technology and numerous associated factors, the looming crisis may slow down but unless it is addressed forthwith, we would be reduced to “burying our heads in

the sand!” Several countries have started witnessing the merger and closure of universities due to their unsustainable business models. In this situation, how can we ignore similar developments taking place in India? There are already talks of turning colleges without sufficient enrolment into centres of continuing education. The writing on the wall is clear. Students of English are woefully unprepared for facing the travails of the Digital Age unless we can realign our focus to meet the challenges posed by it.

Most of the present graduates may not be working in the field of their study anymore and most of them would be switching jobs several times in their lifetime. The ‘Gig economy’ is here to stay and the greatest demand would be for those who can withstand the constant last-minute scheduling. To prepare for the clear and present danger, it is imperative to put all the cards on the table. What do English graduates bring to the job market after their three years of study? A back of the envelope calculation would come up with a list of skills, such as:

1. oral and written communication skills,
2. versatile agility with language skills,
3. independent analytical skills,
4. being capable of independent thought and judgement,
5. people skills, and
6. ability to handle information precisely in addition to creativity and innovation.

While these skills may be sufficient for conventional careers like teaching or language support jobs like interpreters, copywriters, or journalists, they hardly make the cut for the Digital Age careers. This is to be analysed in the light of the fact that many of these conventional jobs run the real danger of being rendered obsolete in the near future. One of the strengths of the emerging AI systems is their ability to take over jobs that are mechanical and repetitive in nature. Conventional careers like those of drivers, market research analysts or salespersons will be taken over by more efficient AI systems. This needs to be viewed from the perspective that these changes are actually opportunities for English as a discipline to realign according to changing times beforehand. It should start with identifying and finding the ‘gaps’ and preparing to fill them, especially the ones that are AI-proof or future-ready.

If we are to realign our English courses, it is necessary to take stock of the various language skills that are acquired during the years of study at the university and realigning them so that it would make students industry-ready. The 2016 IBM Institute for Business Value Global Skills Survey lists the following skills as the most sought after skills in the coming decade:

1. Adaptability
2. Prioritization
3. Collaboration and ability to work in tandem with a team
4. Effective communication

5. Creative thinking

A common factor among all these skills is that most of them are the kind of skills that can be developed by students of English. With the onslaught of the machines, it would be more important than ever to develop human skills that cannot be replicated by machines. Some of the skills that would be nearly impossible to replicate by machines would be:

1. Conflict resolution
2. Negotiation skills
3. Emotional Intelligence and Empathy
4. Critical Thinking
5. Analysis of 'Grey areas'
6. Problem solving
7. Planning

Now that the need for promoting humanities to overcome the challenges posed by the Digital Age has been emphasized, let us try to look at how these skills can be realigned with the present and what applications they might be put to and analyse the emergent new jobs of the Digital Age. It needs to be noted that the New Age jobs need to be future proof as well as make use of the skill sets acquired by English graduates. The silver lining is the fact that with greater penetration of technology and IT, convergence will take place creating the need for a new kind of jobs. The upsurge of data-driven ecosystems would necessitate the rise and development of integrated clusters like User-generated Content

Creation and Distribution, which would in turn lead to a cascading effect on the demand for such information commodities. Emergent technologies like Internet of Things (IoT) would further necessitate greater demand for language solutions of a customised as well general nature.

New Lamps for Old

The digital age world would lead to not just shutting down of conventional jobs which are repetitive and/or mechanical in nature. In their place various new age jobs would emerge. Social media platforms would reach a greater audience driven by the addition of large numbers of online content users who are familiar with English, aided by greater access to cheaper computing devices and better infrastructure for information technology. With more number of Tier II and Tier III cities joining the social media platforms like WhatsApp, Wechat, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, the need for language solutions would increase substantially. Creating, managing and moderating content on multiple social media platforms would be a need for various sectors ranging from corporates to individuals. The Digital Age would herald changes in diverse aspects of life like consumer consumption behaviour. A striking instance would be the monopolies of online marketing sales portal behemoths like Amazon would be looking for better content to drive their sales. This would create jobs for experts in writing skills in English which should focus on clarity and coherence.

Social media influencers would emerge as a single point for content convergence. Influencers may use multiple social media platforms like YouTube or Instagram to post videos or podcasts, which may be streamed to thousands of their subscribers at regular intervals making use of their persuasive English language skills to reach out to their audience. In turn, these influencers would be approached by corporate clients who would seek to market their wares by leveraging the influencers' popular reach. Another emerging area would be Instructional Systems Design or Instructional Design, which produces instructional products in an engaging and inspiring manner. Instructional design would be driven by the fact that large sections of the global population would need enormous amount of training and retraining, and most of them would not ever be stepping into a classroom. The ability to adapt English to suit various needs would be a highly sought after skill.

The advent of 3D printers, DIY kits and the rising popularity of MOOCs indicates a rise in the need for writers of instructional

design. These are just a few of the jobs that are going to witness an upsurge in demand in the days to come. Closer home, in Kerala, the healthcare sector is witnessing systemic changes with 'accreditation' becoming mandatory. They need it to be able to tap the insurance business which necessitates a significant demand for floor managers and HR teams to be able to focus on customer experience and to tap new areas like patient education and disease prevention. This can be done only by professionals armed with a smile and the gift of the gab so as to be able to reduce patient complaints and improve patient referrals.

So, cheer up folks, the sun is shining for English and will continue for some time to come!

References

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