



ECHOES BY
ASRAR CHOWDHURY

Online classes in the time of coronavirus



Have you ever seen a *black swan*? Probably not. If you were asked to write about *black swans*, what would you do if you found out nobody knows about *black swans*? You'd have to imagine the unimaginable. This is nice in fantasy. You fall down the rabbit hole, off to Wonderland. In reality, imagining the unimaginable is full of uncertainty. The phrase *black swan* describes totally unpredictable events, where past experience doesn't exist from which a solution can be found.

Until the year 2019 BC (Before Corona), classes happened the same way for centuries. The teacher enters. Students rise. The teacher calls attendance. Class starts. Interaction is face-to-face. In 2020, the *black swan* pandemic came and disrupted everything. Nobody knew for how long it would last. Nobody knew how it would affect our lives. Nobody knew how to solve the challenge. Each nation had to play safe.

For health safety, education institutions had to be shut down. The next question was: for how long? Once again, nobody had an answer. The pandemic appeared as a *black swan*. Nobody was prepared. Time was ticking away. Schools, colleges, and universities had to find a response. Unless you respond, you'll never know what works and what doesn't. Apparently, life doesn't move in a straight line. Schools, colleges, and universities each faced different problems in online responses.

With schools, students come from similar social backgrounds. They don't live too far away from the school. Colleges tend to attract students from more diverse social backgrounds and geographical locations. Universities attract students from the most diverse social backgrounds and geographical locations. When education institutions were shut down, school students weren't living too far

away from each other. Their access to net speed and devices were similar. Thus, it was possible for some schools in large urban centres to go for online classes via platforms like Zoom that require good devices and high net speed.

With universities (and also colleges), students come from different parts of Bangladesh, where the net speed varies from urban to rural centres. Students of universities also come from diverse social backgrounds. They don't have similar access to devices and net speed. When universities shut down, students went back to their homes scattered throughout Bangladesh or at least scattered within a regional division. This created a big challenge.

How did the teachers fare? Teachers weren't ready for online classes. Some faced problems because they either lacked computer literacy or couldn't choose online platforms when they thought about net speed and device access to their students. Moving away from face-to-face contact meant lack of interaction. Delivering lectures on maths or technical topics became a big challenge.

There are some structural problems to consider. Not all platforms can record when students enter the lecture, or if they attended the entire lecture. This can affect learning outcomes. Finally, the challenge of online exam-assessments is a grey area that needs to be carefully thought. Credibility of exam-assessments forms a fabric of the moral foundations of education institutes.

If education institutes are shut down for a long period, schools, colleges, and universities will have to carefully rethink how they deliver education. A post-pandemic world may never be like 2019 BC for a long time. Meanwhile, looking before we leap; thinking even more carefully; and observing the experience of others is the safest bet to play. Stay home. Stay safe.

The author teaches economics in classrooms. Outside, he watches Test cricket, plays the flute and listens to music & radio podcasts. Email: asrarul@juniv.edu or asrarul@gmail.com

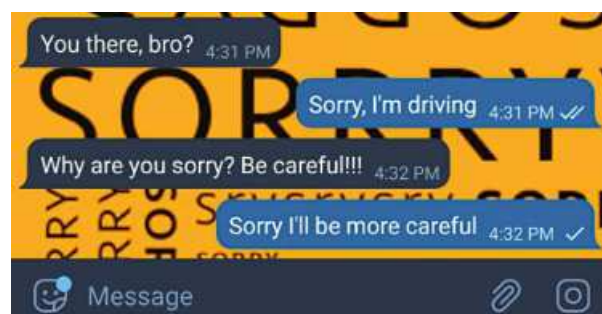
Sorry, not sorry

HIYA ISLAM

If you spare a thought or two, you'll realise the word "sorry" is littered just as often as "like" or "uhmm" in our daily conversations. While no other word does the job of expressing anguish or remorse well enough, saying sorry too much is doing more harm than good in ways we do not realise. Over-apologising is killing your confidence and downplaying your worth, especially in professional capacities.

Why? Because once you apologise for something it implies you are responsible in some way for the inconvenience or mishap that occurred. But is it your fault that you happened to be driving when someone left a text? Or that the guest speaker is late to the seminar? Very often, we are habitually apologising for something we had not done and only for the sake of chivalry.

We can still be considerate without throwing around the word "sorry". Try using "Thank you for waiting" instead of "Sorry, I'm late". Or, "How about we try..." in place of "Sorry to interrupt...". Even something as simple as "Hey, I was driving/at work" is in no sense a mean reply. The first step is to identify when it is unwanted and then finding a better alternative to what you'd say.



One way to do it is to express gratitude and positivity. Say, there is a slight delay processing the bill at the counter. There is a massive difference between "Sorry, here's your bill" and "Your bill, ma'am, and have a good day".

A number of studies found that women are more likely to apologise than men when given a series of hypothetical offenses. The findings suggested that men have a higher threshold to consider an offense worth an apology. This implies that women are more empathetic. But sometimes, it is necessary to dodge the word as it plays to a disadvantage for women in workplaces.

All of this only brings us to ask when should we really

apologise. As easy as it is to slip one out, we all can tell if it is a sincere one. Thus, sincerity is essential. While it is necessary to explain what went wrong that led to an apology, never follow it up with excuses. Excuses show an absence of responsibility. An apology is never about you but the person affected. The key to reforming the bond is, of course, changed behaviour. An apology without corrected behaviour is as useless as a dime thrown in a wishing well.

Apologising is not bad. Just overdoing it impresses a wrong notion of us in the mind of others. However, it's also important that we work around our communication to incorporate a balanced mix of empathy, assertiveness and comfort in terms of the context.

References

1. *The New York Times* (April 22, 2019), *No, You Don't Have to Stop Apologizing*
2. Schumann K. & Ross M. (November, 2010) *Why Women Apologize More Than Men: Gender Differences in Thresholds for Perceiving Offensive Behavior*

Hiya goes to and from between sleep and boredom. Leave her a message at hiyaislam.11@gmail.com