The problem is not with coaching centres or ChatGPT

It's with our education system

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AI and AI-aided learning with radical consequences for society and individuals are here to stay.

The commercial education technology firm in the US called Chegg is somewhat equivalent of our coaching and tutoring centres for school students. It reported five million student subscribers and a revenue of $200 million in the fourth quarter of 2022. It lost $1 billion in share value in the New York Stock Exchange on May 1 due to the reported inroad of artificial intelligence (AI)-generated language tools such as ChatGPT. Launched by OpenAI in November last year, ChatGPT has already taken the digital information world by storm. Microsoft and others are working on their own models. Among other things, students can directly access these language tools to get answers to their questions in texts that can help doing school assignments and homework. Pearson, the UK-based multinational edtech company, has also reported a similar market loss as Chegg.

The low-tech version of student learning assistance in Bangladesh is the ubiquitous coaching and tutoring centres and their analogue devices – the commercial guidebooks and notebooks. Private tutoring and commercial guidebooks have been, in fact, branded by the education authorities, and even many educators, as the villain of the piece for the low quality of education and student learning outcome. Students don't pay attention to schoolwork or study their textbooks, it is alleged; they memorise guidebooks to prepare for the exams, while teachers neglect classroom teaching and go for more lucrative private tutoring after-hours. And, of course, only those who can afford the private fees take advantage of these. Apparently, those who can pay the higher fees for the "best" tutors, engage more tutors for different subjects, and select the "most reputed" coaching centres, can be assured of higher exam scores, including the coveted "Golden GPA."

An education law has been under discussion and has gone through various iterations for more than a decade. The law, among other things, is supposed to restrict private tutoring and coaching centres. An agreement, however, could not be reached about what restrictions would work best and how these could be actually enforced.

The authorities have ordered the coaching centres to be shut down two weeks ahead of the ongoing SSC examination. A recent Bangla news report revealed that students and tutors were found at a coaching centre in Mymensingh behind drawn curtains and closed shutters. Students said they were engaged in last-minute preparation for their tests and the tutors were there to give them helpful tips. In this scenario, how could one blame or punish either the students or the tutors?

Identifying private tutoring, coaching centres and guidebooks as the source of education quality problems leads to treating the symptoms without looking at the root of the disease. Educators point out that the real factors include the inadequate numbers and lack of professional skills of the teachers; motivation of and incentives and professional support for teachers; the facilities and learning environment in the school and the classroom; the quality and content of the curriculum and the learning materials; and the nature and methods of student learning assessment. These are complex and difficult problems that have no easy solutions. But ignoring them and finding scapegoats elsewhere cannot be the solution. Clearly, why students, parents and teachers resort to private tuition and guidebooks have to be addressed, and the reasons for this dependence have to be mitigated.

Countries all over, including those with advanced education systems, have tutoring centres and guides, notes and help books for school subjects and other vocational and occupational subjects, as well as for self-learning. Students make use of these frequently. The difference is that these are not seen as substitutes for schoolwork and classroom teaching, but as complements to what happens at school. We need to ask why it is not so in our schools, and what should be done about it, rather than the prescription of chopping the head off because one has a headache. There are also online tutoring and learning platforms, which have grown rapidly in recent years.

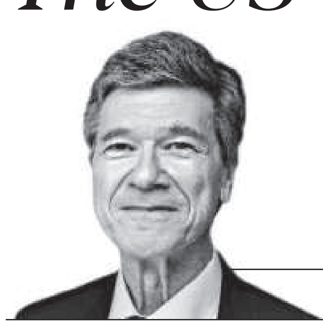
The yawning gap in access and use of educational technology between the higher- and the lower-income countries became sharply visible during the pandemic-driven school closure. There is also a large disparity within each country between those who are privileged in enjoying access to digital technology and being tech-savvy and those who are deprived in this respect.

AI and AI-aided learning with radical consequences for society and individuals are here to stay, and will have profound effects in the educational systems. *Fortune* magazine estimates that edtech and smart classroom business globally has surpassed $100 billion and will continue to grow rapidly. Chegg, Pearson, and similar companies, such as Byju's in India and Zuoyebang in China will surely find ways to build into their own business model the use of ChatGPT and other AI-based methods.

Despite the spread of edtech and its potential benefits, experience so far shows edtech (including AI-based edtech) facing two major challenges. First, access to and enjoying its benefits remain highly unequal, reinforcing the already existing disparities and inequalities in educational systems and in the larger society. Secondly, edtech's strength is in the limited sphere of cognitive learning; it neglects or sidesteps social, emotional, and ethical learning and development. These aspects of learning call for social interaction between students and teachers and among peers as essential elements of the learning process.

A conceptualisation of education and learning that recognises and addresses the two challenges of equity and holistic learning need to be ingrained in the minds of education policymakers and decision-makers. AI and edtech can be helpful for our students in an inclusive manner when the plans and programmes in this respect recognise the basic and long-standing weaknesses in the system. A comprehensive view embracing the basic elements of skilled teachers, motivated learners, effective pedagogy, conducive learning environment, and supportive social interaction cannot be replaced by AI and edtech. But there can be room for online and offline tutoring and digital (and analogue) guidebooks and learning materials within this broader vision of learning and teaching.

The US' wars and debt crisis



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In the year 2000, the US government debt was $3.5 trillion, equal to 35 percent of GDP. By 2022, the debt was $24 trillion, equal to 95 percent of GDP. The US debt is soaring, hence America's current debt crisis. Yet, both Republicans and Democrats are missing the solution: stopping America's wars of choice and slashing military outlays.

Suppose the government's debt had remained at a modest 35 percent of GDP, as in 2000. Today's debt would be $9 trillion, as opposed to $24 trillion. Why did the US government incur the excess $15 trillion in debt?

The single biggest answer is the US government's addiction to war and military spending. According to the Watson Institute at Brown University, the cost of US wars from fiscal year 2001 to fiscal year 2022 amounted to a whopping $8 trillion, more than half of the extra $15 trillion in debt. The other $7 trillion arose roughly equally from budget deficits caused by the 2008 financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic.

To surmount the debt crisis, the US needs to stop feeding the Military-Industrial Complex (MIC), the most powerful lobby in Washington. As President Dwight D Eisenhower famously warned on January 17, 1961, "In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist." Since 2000, the MIC has led the US into disastrous wars of choice in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and now Ukraine.

The MIC long ago adopted a winning political strategy by ensuring that the military budget reaches into every Congressional district. The Congressional Research Service recently reminded Congress, "Defense spending touches every Member of Congress's district through pay and benefits for military service members and retirees, economic and environmental impact of installations, and procurement of weapons systems and parts from local industry, among other activities." Only a brave member of Congress would vote against the military-industry lobby, yet bravery is certainly no hallmark of Congress.

The US' annual military spending is now around $900 billion, roughly 40 percent of the world's total, and greater than the next 10 countries combined. US military spending in 2022 was triple that of China. According to the Congressional Budget Office, the military outlays for 2024-2033 will be a staggering $10.3 trillion on current baseline. A quarter or more of that could be avoided by ending its wars of choice, closing down many of the country's 800 or so military bases around the world, and negotiating new arms control agreements with China and Russia.

Yet, instead of peace through diplomacy and fiscal responsibility, the MIC regularly scares the American people with a comic-book style depiction of villains whom the US must stop at all costs. The post-2000 list has included Afghanistan's Taliban, Iraq's Saddam Hussein, Syria's Bashar al-Assad, Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, Russia's Vladimir Putin, and recently, China's Xi Jinping. War, we are repeatedly told, is necessary for America's survival.

A peace-oriented foreign policy would be opposed strenuously by the military-industrial lobby, but not by the public. Significant public pluralities already want less, not more, US involvement in other countries' affairs, and less, not more, US troop deployments overseas. Regarding Ukraine, Americans overwhelmingly want a "minor role" (52 percent) rather than a "major role" (26 percent) in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. This is why neither Biden nor any recent president has dared to ask Congress for any tax increase to pay for the US' wars. The public's response would be a resounding "No!"

While America's wars of choice have been awful for the country, they have been far greater disasters for countries that it purports to be saving. As Henry Kissinger famously quipped, "To be an enemy of the United States can be dangerous, but to be a friend is fatal." Afghanistan was America's cause during 2001 to 2021, until the US left it broken, bankrupt, and hungry. Ukraine is now in America's embrace, with the same likely results: ongoing war, death, and destruction.

The military budget could be cut prudently and deeply if the US replaced its wars of choice and arms races with real diplomacy and arms agreements. If presidents and Congresses had only heeded the warnings of top American diplomats such as William Burns, the US ambassador to Russia in 2008, and now CIA director, the US would have protected Ukraine's security through diplomacy, agreeing with Russia that the US would not expand Nato into Ukraine if Russia also kept its military out of Ukraine. Yet, relentless Nato expansion is a favourite cause of the MIC; new Nato members are major customers of US armaments.

The US has also unilaterally abandoned key arms control agreements. In 2002, the country unilaterally walked out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. And rather than promote nuclear disarmament, as the US and other nuclear powers are required to do under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the MIC has sold the Congress on plans to spend more than $600 billion by 2030 to "modernise" the US nuclear arsenal.

Now the MIC is talking up the prospect of war with China over Taiwan. The drumbeats of war with China are stoking the military budget, yet war with China is easily avoidable if the US adheres to the One China policy that properly underpins US-China relations. Such a war should be unthinkable. More than bankrupting the US, it could end the world.

Military spending is not the only budget challenge. Ageing and rising healthcare costs add to the fiscal woes. According to the Congressional Budget Office, debt will reach 185 percent of GDP by 2052 if current policies remain unchanged. Healthcare costs should be capped while taxes on the rich should be raised. Yet, facing down the military-industrial lobby is the vital first step to putting America's fiscal house in order, needed to save the country, and possibly the world, from America's perverse lobby-driven politics.