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Dr. D. Suresh



SOCIETY FOR PUBLIC WELFARE AND INITIATIVES
H. No. 5-11-559, Srinagar Colony, Naimnagar,
Hanmakonda, Warangal- 506009. Telengana State (India)
spwi.ngo.2014@gmail.com / sjsw.jp.spwi@gmail.com
devathasuresh@gmail.com Ph: 9959026635

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E-LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA – AN OVERVIEW



P. Laxma Reddy

Research Scholar, Department of English,
Kakatiya University, Warangal,
Telangana State

Abstract: *The teaching-learning process in India is oriented towards the classroom model. The generic approach is transforming into the flexible online systems capable of imparting education in a manner that can never be thought of. With the advent of internet technologies in the past decade, it is bringing a turbulent change in the Indian education system. The present article provides a comprehensive insight into the current status of e-learning education in India. In this article, I had discussed three case examples and concluded that with the growth of the population interested in education, successful e-learning models can be developed and implemented by various universities across the country.*

Key Words: *Significance of e-learning, challenges*

Introduction

Electronic Learning or E-Learning is a boomerang around the world. It has just evolved in India. Government and corporations see it as an essence of business strategy, and the students have gone mad for the courseware and the flexibility of the system. With the introduction of internet technologies in 1995(India), the information can be readily communicated to any part of the country, overcoming the geographical limitations. This has led to better integration of systems employed in government organizations, corporations, and other business institutes. The exchange of ideas, expertise and collaboration can take place almost anytime and anywhere.

E-Learning concepts, tools, models and methodologies can be readily deployed for interactive education, commercial and business purposes. It can be said that e-learning is riding on the shoulders of the giant(the Internet). This will enable us to

achieve the objectives and to bring about the all-round development country is growing exponentially, and this is the major cause of exploring cost-effective and qualitative alternatives. Therefore, an overview of the current state of e-learning programs and systems would be beneficial to many capitalists exploring the opportunities for a profitable venture.

Significance of E-Learning

“In well-facilitated learning environments, through technology, students become excited about what they are learning and aware that they are members of a global community (Berge, 1998). It is a powerful tool for distance education which is marking its presence across school, universities, and organizations. These are due to the inherent advantages of the technology. Some of these are:

1. The number of students aspiring for education is becoming larger day by day, making it impossible to develop the traditional infrastructure (classrooms, physical libraries, hostels) to cater to the ever-growing need. Developing online systems can help meet these growing demands.
2. Due to the larger workforce requirement as guided by the industrial revolution, professionals are lured towards the attractive and soaring incentives to join the race, thus posing a threat to the education industry in terms of the dearth of qualified, experienced and competent faculties, experts and the trained professionals. Developing online systems can help the industry by providing new development avenues to the professionals and sustaining their enthusiasm.
3. Online Systems will also enable the efficient use of resources anytime and in any part of the country. Thus making the whole education system altogether flexible.
4. Also, such systems will enrich the learning process which will enhance the entire learning experience.

Types of E-Learning

There are basically two types of e-learning: synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous, means “at the same time,” involves the interaction of participants with an instructor via the Web in real time. Asynchronous, which means “not at the same time,” allows the participant to complete the Web-Based Training (WBT) at his own pace, without live interaction with the instructor.

A new form of learning known as blended learning is emerging. Blended learning combines e-learning tools with traditional classroom training to ensure maximum effectiveness. Students can prepare for, consolidate and recall classroom experiences online while gaining the benefits of interaction with teachers and students via an

actual or virtual classroom. Student learning and retention rates improve without sacrificing the convenience, cost-effectiveness, and customization of self-paced Web-based coursework. Blended learning offers:

1. Social benefits from classroom training focusing on learning that gains the most from face-to-face interaction
2. Individualization benefits of self-paced, online learning for content that requires minimal interaction.
3. Cost savings through minimizing the time away from the job and travel/classroom/instructor expenses.
4. Greater flexibility to meet the different learning styles and levels of the audience.

The scope of E-Learning in India

E-Learning can be considered at two levels. The first one is at educator level and another one is the trainer level. For an educator, it can be used at both elementary and higher levels. But In a trainer, it can be used by companies to train and upgrade their employees. E-Learning permits the delivery of knowledge and information to the learners at an accelerated pace, opening up a new circle of knowledge transfer. Early adopters are companies that have tried to supplement face-to-face meetings, demonstrations, training classes and lectures with this technology. The adoption of e-learning in all spheres corporate, schools, universities, etc., is low at present. The Indian market is not substantial when compared to the international market. E-Learning in India has been most successful in the corporate segment where it is seen as a means of achieving business goals and motivating employees. A lot of work has to be done to make e-learning successful for education, both formal and informal and to cultivate the faith of people in online degrees in India apart from the ones given by renowned institutions like IITs. Today, E-learning has already bordered beyond the academe. It is now an option used by companies to educate their employees on information dissemination, training and more. By using this route of instruction, millions of dollars will be saved by companies in training and educating their employees. If e-learning reaches the remote and rural parts of India, it would be much faster to educate people. One major problem faced by India is that almost all highly skilled professionals are based in bigger cities that deprive the rural population of getting educated through them. E-learning simplifies this process by taking the knowledge to masses provided that there's internet connectivity available at some nearby area. Even in the area of higher education, supply and demand are not balanced. Looking at the population, the available universities are not enough to accommodate all the people seeking education. At this point distance education comes in and has already been quite popular. E-learning can play a major role even here.

Advantages of E-Learning

There are several advantages of e-learning. First, Users are able to proceed through a program at their own pace. Users can access an e-learning course anytime, anywhere, and learn only as much as they need. E-learning can be accessed by Web browsing software on any platform. A training program can be delivered to any machine over the internet or intranet without having to author a program for each platform. Most computers have access to a browser, are connected to the organization's intranet or the internet. There is no need for a separate distribution mechanism. If changes need to be made to a program or courseware after the first implementation, these changes are made on the servers storing the program or courseware. Everyone worldwide can instantly access the update of information. There are no travel costs for bringing remote employees to a centralized workshop. Not only from a qualitative standpoint (i.e., pedagogical by the use of a new method, personalization, learner autonomy, memorization and follow-up, operational by learning by opportunity and the speed of the learning updates, and organizational by creation of knowledge sharing community) but also from a quantitative standpoint (i.e., learning elapse decreases, learning cost may be reduced and learning effectiveness is increasing).

Disadvantages of E-Learning

Besides the advantages of e-Learning, there are some disadvantages too. The first and fare most is Limited bandwidth. It means slower performance for sound, video and intensive graphics, causing long waits for download that can affect the ease of the learning process. Future technologies will solve the problem, however. Besides this, there are some other drawbacks with E-learning there is a general concern that as we move towards more computer usage, a terminal will replace a friendly face. The gradual introduction of e-learning or the use of blended learning may be the answer to this concern. E-learning programs are too static. The level of interactivity is often too limited. E-learning systems take more time and more money to develop than expected. This is indeed the case, as it is with any new technology that is implemented. It is easier by starting with an easy program and building on success. Not all courses are delivered well by computer. Some training topics are not best served by computer based training and require a more personal touch. Team building issues and dealing with emotional issues are two examples. Progress in the field of e-learning has been relatively slow when compared to other fields'. A lot of web-based systems are not better than systems that were developed 15 years ago. Still, the focus is often on how to develop a lot of courses and not on how to improve the quality of learning.

E-Learning and Challenges

Over the last 50 years, the Government of India has provided full policy support and substantial public funds to create one of the world's largest systems of higher education. These institutions, with the exception of some notable ones, have, however,

not been able to maintain the high standards of education or keep pace with developments in the fields especially in knowledge and technology. Over time, financial constraints with exploding enrolments, and very high demand from primary and secondary education has led to the deterioration in the financial support provided by the government. On top of this, an overall structure of myriad controls with a rigid bureaucracy has stifled its development. Majority of the population staying in rural areas and making them aware of the concept of e-Learning is a major challenge. Lack of infrastructure in terms of connectivity, availability of the Internet, etc. is another issue. The government is taking various measures to improve the communication systems and new technologies like 3G in the telecom space have already started to be implemented to make things better.

Social Implications of E-Learning is another segment of study that is very important to be understood for the success of e-learning in India. The social implications of e-learning may be categorized into the following types of issues: cultural, gender, lifestyle, geographical, religious/spiritual, literacy, disabilities, and the digital divide. Within the cultural issues, the category is content, multimedia, writing styles, writing structures, Web design, and participant roles. Some content, although crucial to the course, maybe either unacceptable or unfavorable with certain members of the class. If faculties are aware of a sensitive component of the discussion or material covered, how can that faculty member lead the class to include or exclude the materials? Even writing styles can impact the process of holding an online course. The students and instructor need to know the rules of the road of written assignments. And, what participant roles are expected and/or tolerated; and, if the expectations are not met, who is responsible for keeping discussions and homework on track? Gender issues continue to be a part of the class, even though people are separated by miles and even continents. Possibly it is the instructor's responsibility to monitor facilitation and rotate leadership roles in groups to assure gender neutralization. Any behavior issues must be addressed and corrected immediately. Lifestyle differences take on any number of forms, and the instructor will need to be on guard to assure equal treatment of class members, regardless of their respective lifestyles and preferences. In some situations, the students themselves will take on this monitoring role, while in other situations the instructor must step in. The different strokes for different folk's adage must be maintained, preferably with a minimum of disruption to the entire class. Geographical issues and differences make be very apparent, especially when we are looking at a global perspective. For example, if a chat room activity is to take place, all impacted time zones need to be accommodated. Within this category would also fall the insensitive locale jokes. And even the technology issue of Internet access needs to be considered. In some communities, dial-up access is the only possible means of interconnect; there are no alternatives. Religious and spiritual considerations must be addressed and honored. Perhaps it would be unwise for an instructor to require work be done on certain days, given that these days may be religious days for some religions;

suggest, perhaps, a block of time when activities might be assigned. Sensitivity to religions is critical. Literacy should be a given for an online course, but it cannot be overlooked. Regardless of the level of the course, there will very possibly be people who lack certain skills (or at least could use improvement): reading, writing, information and keying (typing) are skills which are necessary but may need improving. Disabilities must not be overlooked. The Digital Divide is the last category within these social implications to be discussed in this presentation and paper. Regardless of how the term digital divide is defined, it means there is a gap, whether this difference is between general and minority groups, men and women, persons with disabilities and the remainder of the population, young and older members of the class. It comes down to differences those without something (whatever this something happens to be) and those without it. Accessibility to technology and the training to use this technology will help reduce the digital divide, the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

Conclusion

In a market such as India where the concept is still new, one crucial element that will make a difference in generating a good response is marketing. This not only holds true for segments such as government and education but for the corporate sector as well. The past decade has been a time of rapid change as E-learning has replaced traditional learning methods. It can be expected that we have not peaked out and the future is going to bring innovations that can hardly be anticipated. Internet access to cell phones and the widespread use of palm pilots and laptop computers are opening new opportunities for education and learning. Experts are of the view that there needs to be a mindset for the adoption of e-learning. The other point is content. If content providers are giving off-the-shelf content, there should be scope for customization since each organization has its own needs. Regions without university education can access universities in other regions via the Web, a solution much cheaper than building university infrastructure. In underdeveloped countries, e-learning can raise the level of education, literacy and economic development. This is especially true for countries where technical education is expensive, opportunities are limited, and economic disparities exist. However, one of the problems with e-learning in India is the lack of course content, especially outside the mainstream focus areas of IT education, English-language content, and tutorial-like courses. There will be a high demand for people who can develop multi-lingual courseware that addresses various topics. The social implications of online learning center around one primary requirement that students need to feel a part of the class, regardless of where they are located physically or geographically. The missing of connection to the other students in the class and with the institution can impact the success of an online student. Bottom line: the Indian market is still young, but it will continue to adopt the concept of e-learning in order to meet its communication needs and seize business opportunities.

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