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THE ROLE OF E-LEARNING IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

An abbreviation for electronic learning, E-learning signifies the use of computer and similar alternative devices to impart education. This type of learning mostly employs technology and Internet to access educational material or sources, in contrary to traditional classroom methods. ELearning is a broadly used term generally referring to web-based learning, online learning, blended learning, networked learning, distributed learning and flexible learning. It is increasingly being seen as a tool to widen the access to education and developmental opportunities not only at the institutional level but nation as a whole. The education system in India need to enhance the reach of education, improve retention patterns, smooth out disparities in education, training of teachers and compensate for the lack of teachers in remote areas. In spite of long-time efforts by Indian policymakers through planning tools, Indian education system has not succeeded in providing educational infrastructure to all the corners of the country. Though the educational institutes of India are trying to deliver quality education, every institution has distinct goals, standards and regulations, budget pressures, security concerns, and technical legacies. Therefore single solutions for the entire problem may not be an appropriate model. The population receiving education in India is growing exponentially and this is the main reason for exploring cost effective and qualitative alternatives. The study of problem and prospects of E-Learning in India would be beneficial to learners, educational institutes and capitalists exploring the opportunities for a profitable venture. The study will be highly beneficial to the huge learning community of India and the world. Further, studies in this direction are highly beneficial for policymakers of today and tomorrow to for creating a suitable environment for the growth of E-learning in Indian context specifically and for the world in general.

KEY WORDS: E-Learning, education, computer, technology and networked learning.

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INTRODUCTION

E-Learning is learning utilizing electronic technologies to access educational curriculum outside of a traditional classroom. In most cases, it refers to a course, program or degree delivered completely online. There are many terms used to describe learning that is delivered online, via the internet, ranging from distance education, to computerized electronic learning, online learning, web learning and lots of others. E-Learning as courses that are specifically delivered through the internet to somewhere other than the classroom where the academician are teaching. It is not a course delivered through a DVD or CD-ROM, video tape or over a television channel. It is interactive in that learner can also communicate with teachers or other students in his class. Sometimes it is delivered live, where you can "electronically" raise your hand and interact in real time and sometimes it is a lecture that has been prerecorded.

Computing technology was not created by teachers. There has been little consultation between those who promote its use in schools and those who teach with it. Decisions to purchase technology for education are very often political decisions. Most staff using these technologies did not grow up with them. Training teachers to use computer technology did improve their confidence in its use, but there was considerable dissatisfaction with training content and style of delivery. The communication element, in particular, was highlighted as the least satisfactory part of the training, by which many teachers meant the use of a VLE and discussion forums to deliver online training. Technical support for online learning, lack of access to hardware, poor monitoring of teacher progress and a lack of support by online tutors were just some of the issues raised by the asynchronous online delivery of training.

WEB-BASED LEARNING

All of us have access to the internet and we use it for many different things like researching for some information for school and college projects, downloading music, pictures, wallpapers, and screen-savers, to get updates on the latest happenings all over the world, emails, instant messaging, chats, and many other things. One more advantage of the internet and that is learning. Learner can educate in the comfort of his own home and get a degree through the internet now. With the latest technology, even the impossible seems possible now. Web-based learning is commonly referred to as E-Learning or online learning. It essentially includes learning online

through the courses that are offered on the internet. Emails, live lectures, and videoconferencing are all possible through the net. This enables all the participants to give their views on a particular topic and then discuss them further. They also offer static pages like course materials that are printed for the benefit of all the participants. Main advantages of accessing pages on the web is that most of the web pages have hyperlinks that will lead to another page and thus opens up a vast amount of information on the net.

Student does not have the time to actually go to a University and attend classes. Earlier it would have been a major problem, as learner would not know how to manage that, but not anymore. With the several courses available online, students can actually sit at home and learn. No more of waking up early and attending classes or that irritating class mate. Now take whichever course at peace and at their convenience. A web-based course would typically include course information, timetable, notice board, curriculum map, teaching materials like articles, slides, and handouts, communication through discussion boards and email, summative and formative assessments, student management tools like statistics, records, and student tracking, and also links to external and internal websites that are very useful.

ADVANTAGES OF ELEARNING

Students are able to link the various resources in several varying formats. It is a very efficient way of delivering courses online. Due to its convenience and flexibility, the resources are available from anywhere and at any time. Everyone, who are part time students or are working full time, can take advantage of web-based learning. Web-based learning promotes active and independent learning. Students have access to the net always; you can train yourself anytime and from anywhere also. It is a very convenient and flexible option; above all, you don't have to depend on anyone for anything. Not only can you train yourself on a day to day basis, but also on weekends or whenever you have the free time to. There is no hard and fast rule. Through discussion boards and chats, you are able to interact with everyone online and also clear your doubts if any. The video instructions that are provided for audio and video learning can be rewound and seen and heard again and again if you do not happen to understand the topic first time around.

DISADVANTAGES OF ELEARNING

There are not many disadvantages of E-Learning, the main one being that learner get knowledge only on a theoretical basis and when it comes to putting to use whatever learner have learnt, it may be a little different. The face-to-face learning experience is missing. Most of the online assessments are limited to questions that are only objective in nature. There is also the problem of the extent of security of online learning programs. The authenticity of a particular student's work is also a problem as online just about anyone can do a project rather than the actual student itself. The assessments that are computer marked generally have a tendency of being only knowledge-based and not necessarily practicality-based.

PROBLEMS OF CURRENT EDUCATION SYSTEM IN INDIA

Having an educated population is very important when it comes to the overall well being of a nation. An educated work force can translate into billions of dollars for a countries economy and to its overall GDP. For many decades India's educational system has produced some of the top minds in the world which have eventually seemed to migrate to other parts of the world. Today you might see such people in your communities serving as doctors, engineers or even as professors at university. How is a country that faces so many hardships able to create great minds? Is it due to a superb educational system or is it because India has such a large population to draw from? Some individuals might argue that it is a combination of the two. Although India educates many research students who may settle to work in different parts of the world, it can however be suggested that its educational system is still suffering. Many people across the world are aware that India has educated people with a lot of desirable skills. Large corporations from around the world have setup divisions to take advantage of the large educated labour pool. Having a large educated population might naturally and very well so be a sign of a strong educational system. In the case of India though, for many poor people a strong educational system is by no means true. Current education in India is not keeping up with demand and for some individuals it is not providing results. Few people are choosing teaching as a profession, and this has resulted in a shortage of good teachers. Often inexperienced teachers are employed and as a result the quality of education drops.

POVERTY

Poverty in India is a tremendous problem and it separates who will be successful and who will not. Previously, 26 percent of India's population lived below the poverty line, with approximately equal distribution in both the rural and urban areas. Now this rift has worsened. "Indians living in its villages are starkly worse off than those living in cities." Another challenge is significant childhood malnutrition. A recent National Family Health survey in 2006 found that nearly a quarter of the rural infants have low weight for their height which is up from one fifth from 1999. Although education is free under the Education Bill, 2001, large portions of rural India cannot afford to send their children to school because they are kept home to support the family. To make education more accessible, some Indian institutions have created online learning sites were students can learn and obtain certain skills and credits. However, these courses are designed to serve a small fraction of the population: the educated and wealthy urban elite. Online courses in India also ignore the content around basic literacy and primary education needs of the marginalized poor rural population.

ABSENT TEACHERS

Although it seems that many people in India have access to higher education it is at the local level where the education system is suffering. A report released by the World Bank outlines that 25% of teachers in India do not report to work (World Bank, 2006). This is not just a phenomenon with young teachers but with older, well-educated teachers as well. Another problem with the system, mainly in the primary grades is that teachers sub-contract out their teaching duties. They assign their work load to less experienced individuals and pay them part of their salary. So as they sit at home or work another job, someone else comes in and teaches their classes. These sub-contracted teachers are less educated and do not have the expertise to teach. If an E-learning alternative was setup, students could have a choice of obtaining their education from another source as they do in more developed countries. With such a large portion going to staffing it seems that the government is not getting their return on investment. With such a large portion of budget spent on staffing, perhaps it is time for the government of India to assess its investment in e-learning.

ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY

Although computers have been around for a while they are still not accessible for many people in the world. This is due to the high cost of infrastructure. The reasons why the number of computer use is so low could be attributed to the high cost of computer hardware compared to income of the average person. An average person can save all of their money for two years before they can afford a computer. Another reason access to technology is limited is due to infrastructure. All throughout India, major infrastructure is lacking, from regular power use to telephone connections. Most of countries rural communities do not enjoy the lifestyle that their urban brothers and sisters enjoy. Due to constraints on the power grid, India's rural communities are the first ones to have their power turned off, so that the cities manufacturing districts can keep on producing. The limited access to technology makes it difficult to provide education to many Indians. Without affordable hardware and sustainable power there might be little hope. In recent years the government has recognized the problem and has taken steps to solve some of the problems. With such a small population having access to computers and internet infrastructure it makes it difficult to provide the necessary E-learning curriculum. Over the past few years, internet usage has rapidly expanded in India. Many rural areas of India are seeing an increase in access through local phone connects and cyber cafes, which have opened up in the thousands. With growing competition amongst the service providers, access is also becoming cheaper and better. The price of computers is also falling steeply. The market for second hand computers is allowing computers to be sold at an affordable price. As the price drops, so does the attractiveness of learning options.

CLASS SYSTEM

Educational access in India is complicated by the intermingling of class and caste limitations. The caste system depends on birth, whereas there is more latitude to choose occupation in the class system. However, there is clear correlation between caste and wealth. In addition, the belief that inequalities among castes are divinely ordained means that inequality not only exists but is expected. Educational initiatives in India have focused on two main areas: basic literacy, and higher education which allows professional growth and a national ability to compete in a global market. After Independence, India chose to focus on higher education, resulting in a failure to address basic literacy for the poor. As a result, "State supported schools cater to the needs of the

masses while elite private schools cater to the needs of the upper and upper middle classes." In order to help increase educational access among the poorer classes, The National Policy on Education, 1986, introduced a focus on basic education and literacy. In addition, Article 46 of the amended constitution of India states that the government will promote the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections, the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. This functionalist approach immediately encounters the obstacle of cost; allowing considerable input from the various castes and classes would be necessary before committing to expensive connective technologies.

GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES

To bridge the education gap between rural and urban India, the government has entered into a partnership with private companies. The Indian government is pursuing high-impact technology research that can improve the lives of common people in developing economies. Bringing the price of technology down will enable rural India to access the world with connectivity at its doorstep. Before Media Lab brings low-cost computing to the villages, however, it must overcome the fact that only 86% of Indian villages have access to electricity, many villages lack telephone access, and only a few have internet access. Using environmental technologies that elicit a sense of familiarity and comfort in the rural population could help this situation. For example, combining existing bricks and mortar infrastructure with information accessibility through ICT, learning strategies can help improve literacy in historically disadvantaged and disaffected in urban centers and rural northern India.

PRIVATE SECTOR STRATEGIES

Microsoft is incorporating the use of technology in rural communities in India. It has introduced an innovative multi-party research project called Digital Study Hall. Digital Study Hall hopes to improve education in low-income areas by creating digital video database of K-12 material. With local teachers actively mediating the video lessons, high-quality recordings of lessons for instance in English, Math, and Science are made available. Education is by no means the only way in which Microsoft is introducing technology into rural parts of India.

CONCLUSION

E-Learning has become extremely popular. The rise in Internet users and the revolutionary changes that have happened in education have created a fertile environment for E-Learning to grow. The face of higher education has experienced a sea change over the decades. Once characterized by the traditional classroom model, higher education today has changed into learning that is instant, online, self-driven and on the go. The journey of higher education in India has been marked with innumerable milestones– most recently, E-Learning. The government of India is strong supporter of E-learning and the department of electronics and Information Technology has been actively developing tools and technologies to promote it. These are content development, research and development technology initiatives, human resource development projects, and faculty training initiatives to improve through Learning. The only way to sustain a better future is by educating the younger generation with effective and efficient education methodologies. The study shows the positive effects of E-Learning for the higher education system in India. In the country like India it is very essential that the ELearning reaches the lowest sections of the society so that in the near future, we have strong and stable labour force in services and agriculture sector.

The term open and distance learning and its definition are relatively new in the field of education, having gained prominence only in the past 15 to 20 years. The language and terms used to describe distance learning activities can still be confusing, and geographical differences in usage. India has many obstacles to overcome before it can offer its entire population access to an advance technology like E-learning. Large segments of the population live in poverty and many do not know how to read or write. Also the lack of infrastructure around the country only allows the median to be accessed by upper class who can afford it. But this is no reason for the country to give up on E-learning. Although with all the obstacles, the future looks bright for E-learning in India. Both the private sector and public sector are working hard to develop content requirements for the education market including K-12, higher education, universities, professional education, technical training and lifetime learning. In India, over the past decade, technology has been seen as an agent of power and control. The government has recognized that embracing technology can make India really powerful by allowing it to urbanize faster to match the clout that western nations already have. In the knowledge economy the main competitive

advantage of nations is not their physical assets but the quality and skill of their people. E-learning, if used effectively, can provide education to a large population that would otherwise not have access to it. In India, education through technology is way to irradiate years of caste oppression, poverty and at same time increase literacy.

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