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VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: ISSUES AND SUGGESTIONS

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ABSTRACT

In the era of ICT and Internet it is important to keep pace with rapid changes in the technology that are taking place in the world, especially for developing countries with strong emphasis on the Education sector. For this, changes ought to be introduced in the teaching-learning process. The Use of Internet is becoming an engine of innovation in education. The Internet or indeed ICT and all its interactive elements are able to have an extremely positive impact to the learning potential of students as well as teachers. Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is a web-based toolkit that facilitates learning through the provision and integration of online teaching and learning materials. This paper shows the concept of virtual learning environment, virtual community, characteristics of present virtual learning environment/classrooms; differentiate with traditional learning environment, demerits and suggestions of VLE, proposed model and some innovative initiatives by the government of India.

KEYWORDS

ICT, VLE, Collaborative Learning, Virtual community, Video Conferencing, e-Library, Virtual Classroom.

INTRODUCTION

As we know the field of Information and Communication Technology is a challenging field. The rapid growth and uses of Internet made in the field of ICT have led to a revolutionary shift in the field of education and training and the Open library plays a vital role. More and more learners/students are taking education via these open sources to relish their dreams. To cater to this large segment of learners, a number of institutions including the virtual institutions have started offering a wide range of courses on the web called web-based education tutorials or online courses or virtual courses. They can access these tutorials any time any where from the web. Thus, it acts as collaborator between the creators and learners of knowledge and formed a global knowledge network. Again the availability of free Open Source Software like ELMS[1] has also brought a drastic change the way how information is delivered and accessible freely. There are a number of universities in India which are working for creating such type of open learning system which can be freely accessed by anyone. Such advancements in ICTs have enabled to provide education by adopting maximum technologies in a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Modern library systems are also coming up to deliver their services in such an environment.

VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT (VLE)

A VLE is a virtual classroom that allows teachers and students to communicate with each other online. Class information, learning materials, and assignments are typically provided via the Web. Students can log in to the class website to view this information and may also download assignments and required reading materials to their computers. In a virtual classroom, the teacher may communicate with the students in real-time using video or Web conferencing. This type of communication is typically used for giving lectures and for question and answer sessions. If the teacher only needs to send out a homework assignment, he or she can simply post a bulletin on the class website. The students may also receive an e-mail notification letting them know a new assignment has been posted. If class members have questions about the homework, they can participate in online forums or submit individual questions to the teacher. Virtual learning environments are a popular method of e-learning, which refers to learning through electronic means. While a VLE cannot fully replace the traditional classroom, it can be a useful way of teaching students who reside in many different locations. VLE contains the online learning services. This is a learning platform that organizes and provides access to online learning services for the students, teachers and administrators. In VLE, the learner is at a far off place from the tutor or teacher or instructor. He/She uses some form of technology (obviously internet connected computer) to access the learning resource materials which are web-based and also interacts with the teacher/tutor or instructor and other learners.

VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

A virtual community or online community is a group of people who, initially or basically communicate via the internet, instead of face to face. Virtual community is computer mediated space where there is an integration of content and communication with an emphasis on member-generated content [2]. They usually utilize some type of collaboration software (social networking software) and adopt an appropriate name for their purpose, such as open source communities producing software in open code [3]. The web environment provides a number of opportunities to both the teachers and learners. In the environment, learner gets access and share a wide range of knowledge. They can develop new ways for learning. The web also provides support for high tech learning where teacher acts as a facility provider for the students.

Virtual Learning Environments are diverse in size, capability and service offered. There can be three models of Virtual schools i) Asynchronous, ii) Synchronous and iii) broadcast. According to Russell (2001) in Asynchronous model there is no direct communication between teacher and students, as they do not avail of chat or video conferencing facilities. Synchronous models usually involve more communication and collaboration through video conferencing and live chats. Broadcast models allow students to access lectures or broadcasts on the Internet [4]. All these models offer a wide range of learning flexibility in virtual environments that serve the individual needs of the learners regardless of their age, gender, religion, nationality or disability. Virtual learning with innovative applications of ICT has become today a boon. The University of Delhi set up an Institute of Lifelong Learning (ILL) with major responsibility towards teacher training, development of learning material and delivery system. There are many other universities and IITs which are also working in the development of Virtual Learning Environment such as Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), Aligarh Muslim University, Jamia Hamdard University, Delhi University, Hyderabad University IIT Roorkee, IIT Kanpur and many more.

CHARACTERISTICS OF VIRTUAL LEARNING CLASSROOMS

Virtual classroom also needs equivalent equipment and tools in the form of network-based software application to allow a group of instructors and students to carry out the learning process. It facilitates self learning at the learner's convenient time and place. Electronic publication is cheaper and faster. It facilitates faster and cheaper delivery of the material. No physical boundary is required for getting access to virtual learning. Entire universe is the classroom. It enables to update learning materials speedily. The output of virtual teaching-learning process depends upon the factors like students' motivation for self-learning, subject expertise and communication skills of the teacher, on-line problem-solving facility, connectivity to e-library, and use of technology based lightly interactive multimedia, etc.

DEMERITS OF VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND SUGGESTIONS

Unlike formal school learning, virtual learning is a collaborative process and emphasizes on cooperative effort and interactions. The medium of instruction in virtual learning in India is broadly restricted to English and Hindi languages, and occasionally some regional programmes are being telecasted. It would take some time to develop the software for teaching-learning in vernacular languages.

Basically, there are four principles to be kept in mind for successful teaching in the virtual classroom i) media richness, ii) timely responsiveness, iii) organization and iv) interaction.

In the traditional classroom learning environment, a pleasing voice, occasional jokes, dramatic gestures, eye contact with the teacher and the classroom interaction can help to bear a long lecture. But in virtual classrooms, there is only the computer screen and the printed pages. Even if the multimedia is there, long segments of lecture-type materials are boring. Hence, in order to maintain interest, the instructor should use written language in a skillful way by putting some humour and metaphors. It is better to active participation by the students and stimulate collaborative assignments that involve both social and task-oriented activities. The instructor should deliver small segments of lecture with print/pre-recorded materials accompanied with opportunities for students' participation. Secondly, unlike the traditional classrooms, the students in the virtual classroom will not receive an immediate response to their questions and comments. This can be very frustrating, especially if they are unable to solve a mathematics problem or project assignment in the middle. In this case, in order to encourage the students, the instructor can promote more active participation / interaction and provide the feedback to students in the virtual classroom more frequently/daily. Thirdly, unless the study materials of online courses/virtual classrooms get organized, students will become very confused. Therefore, the instructor must establish regular rhythms and schedules, based on dividing the course into modules which last a week, a week and half, or two weeks each so that the participants can plan ahead in terms of when they will need to sign online and when work will be due, and so that the group moves through the topics in an orderly manner.

Another strategy is for the instructor to enter the stimulus materials for each week's work on a regular basis, with new material predictably appearing at least twice a week. The most significant determinant of the students' satisfaction in the online courses/virtual classrooms is the amount and quality of interaction between the instructor and the students, and/or among the students. Collaborative learning is encouraged in case of virtual classrooms which emphasize group / cooperative efforts among faculty and students. In this context, knowledge is viewed as a social construct, and therefore, the educational process is facilitated by social interaction in an environment that facilitates peer interaction evaluation and cooperation [5, 6]. The "teacher" becomes primarily a facilitator who structures learning opportunities, serves as a resource, and encourages the students to work together to build a common body of knowledge. The virtual classroom/learning environment not only facilitates collaborative learning but also supports independent learning and generative, active learning techniques that are self-paced by each participant. Besides these, there are other drawbacks of virtual Learning Environment like:

- The teacher is not present physically. Thus, virtual classroom lacks the human touch. The virtual students seem more frustrated, not only from the technology but from the inability to ask the teacher questions in a face-to-face environment. As the virtual learning environment lacks human face-to-face interaction, critics are of the opinion that probably it has a long-term effect on the children's emotional development and interpersonal relationship when they would be grown up as adults in society.
- It is thought that children will miss out on the important friendships that are usually formed in traditional schools and this will lead to poor social skills in adulthood. Virtual classrooms are suitable for higher learning only, not for primary level children. For availing the facilities of virtual learning the learner has to be matured, self-motivated, computer literate and well versed with the components of virtual classroom. Primarily the teacher in the virtual classroom follows the Lecture-cum-demonstration method with multi-media use which is suitable for higher level courses.
- It is not suitable for lab-based and activity oriented courses. There is no scope for testing the entry level behaviors; thus a teacher cannot judge the degree of disparity among students.
- Also the differences in learning styles and ranging aptitude levels would result in further discrepancy.
- In a virtual classroom set up, the role of a teacher is significant but students' response is secondary. Hardly the teacher does have the scope to get an immediate feedback regarding his teaching.
- There is little scope for direct teacher-student intervention and two-way communication. The factors, like subject expertise, communication skill, expression through body language, personality, skill of holding students' interest and attention play a very crucial role in virtual learning and the success of the programming course primarily depends on these factors.

PROPOSED VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT MODEL

To boost the ICT based Virtual Learning Environment Education it is essential to adopt:

- Intensive and rigorous short term training courses.
- Continuing education programme.
- Workshops/conference/seminars.
- In-service training.
- Project based learning.
- Computer assisted instruction.
- Creation, storage and access the learning resources.
- Lesson planning and assessment.
- Manage access to learner's information and resources and also tracking of progress and achievement.
- Communication with learners via emails, notices, chat, blogs.
- Self assessment quizzes.
- Formal assessment functions such as examination, presentation of projects etc.
- Provision for necessary hyperlinks to create a unified presentation to the students.
- Interaction in vernacular language
- Integrate heterogeneous technologies and multiple pedagogical approaches.
- Upgradation of teachers' skills in developing and delivering the course content through networks.
- Developing intelligence learning technology by having self teaching guides or do it yourself series.

SOME INITIATIVES IN VLE BY IGNOU IN INDIA

E-GYANKOSH

It is a digital repository initiated by IGNOU to enhance the accessibility of knowledge to share its valuable resources with educational institutions and learners internationally. This national Digital Repository acts as a podium to store, index, preserve and share the digital learning resources developed by the Open and Distance Learning Institutions in the country [7].

GYAN DARSHAN

A satellite based TV channel devoted to educational and developmental needs of the society [8].

NODLINET (NATIONAL OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNERS' LIBRARY AND INFORMATION NETWORK)

The Library and Documentation Division of IGNOU has started giving efforts to take higher education to the doorsteps of the hitherto un-reached through its various modes of Information and Document Delivery Services [9].

IUC-TEFED

Inter University Consortium for Technology-Enabled Flexible Education and Development (IUC-TEFED) is the latest initiative of IGNOU which works as a nodal point to undertake all types of collaborative activities involving Open and Distance Learning, e-learning new knowledge creation, appropriate technology, etc. [10].

CONCLUSION

As an impact of the globalization and ICT revolution as well, there is generally an agreed implication that education and training should go in the tune of the same. Virtual Learning schools all over the world, as such, are accepting the new technologies. In this regard, India is lagging behind in comparison with other advanced countries like, US, UK, etc. The establishment of the Indian Training and Education Network for Development (INTEND) by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India is a good approach of the government. The initiatives taken up by IGNOU and other Universities are a good signal in the country. The future of virtual learning environments has many innovative and exciting possibilities. At the same time adventures in learning call for creative and potent environments where individuals share meaningful knowledge and experiences in constructing new information and ideas. These adventures foster mutual collaboration that allows learners to apply newly acquired learning in the design of insightful, cognitive processing without detachment/ obscurity from real-life situations. A judicious blend of both traditional and virtual learning environment with special attention to students' needs and satisfaction can create constructive and creative learners, teaching community and learned society. The use of new ICT by the Indian Schools/Universities should be encouraged to produce professionals to manage knowledge resources in the VLE.

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