

From F2F to Online Sessions: Changing Pattern of Instructions in Open and Distance Learning in India

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Abstract—This paper presents an assessment study conducted among the distance learners in India. Open and distance learning systems have traveled a long way since its inception and its journey has witnessed the evolution and adoption of different generations of technology. This study focuses on the distant learners in India. Sampling for this study has been derived from the mass enrollment from Tamil Nadu area, a southern state of India. Learners were chosen from dual mode universities, private universities, Tamil Nadu Open University and IGNOU. The main focus of the study is to examine the coverage and appropriation of students support services and learning aids. It explores two aspects: the facilities available and the awareness and use of such services. It includes, self-learning materials, face-to-face counseling, multimedia learning materials, website, e-learning, radio and television services etc. While exploring the student's perspective on these learning aspects, it is important to understand the perspectives of the teachers. Two different interests are visible among the teachers. Majority of the teachers support face-to-face counseling. However, the young teachers are in favour of online learning and multimedia supports in teaching. Through the awareness is somewhat high, the actual participation in online is very low. This is due to the inadequate infrastructure as well as the traditional attitudes of the teachers. Still the face-to-face sessions remain popular than online.

Keywords—Face-to-face session, online session, distance learning, multimedia

I. INTRODUCTION

DISTANCE education was fraught with difficulties in early years. Distance accreditation was not accepted in the beginning and professors were not in favour of any education through correspondence mode. It was not until the foundation of the open universities in the 1970s that this image began to change. Although the course materials produced by the Open University of the United Kingdom, the FernUniversität in Hagen in Germany and the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia in Madrid, Spain were highly praised, it was the student support services and feedback provided by these universities that enabled distance education to change its negative image [1]. The research on distance education, correspondence courses, and extension teaching is about seventy years old and almost always supports the widely cited 'no significant difference' phenomenon. Hundreds of comparative studies of classroom teaching versus alternative media for delivering educational content, whether via cassette, videotape, television, or over the Internet, have found that distance education courses are no less effective than traditional, face-to-face courses offered at most educational institutions.

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II. CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

Emerging technologies are capable of providing as much interaction between instructors and their students as instructors can manage. Critics, however, interpret 'no significant difference' to mean that because there is no evidence that distance education courses do anything to enhance, improve, or enrich students' learning experiences, performance, or subjective satisfaction, administrators ought to invest their energy in trying to reduce class sizes and improve instructor salaries and existing teaching facilities. Critics viewed that technology cannot facilitate effective teaching and learning, but that the cornerstones of good teaching must always involve mentoring, internalization, identification, role modeling, guidance, socialization, interaction and group activity [2].

Although no significant difference in student performance was found between the two learning conditions, our data reveal intriguing relationships between students' prior knowledge, attitudes, and learning styles and our web-based writing environment. One finding that we focus on here was that reflective, global learners performed significantly better online than active, sequential learners, whereas there was no difference between them in the conventional class. Our study highlights the complexity of effective teaching and the difficulty of making comparisons between the online and the classroom environments.

Traditionally a mission of university extension units to reach "nontraditional" students by a variety of means, distance education now often refers primarily to computer-based instruction. However, distance education and computer-based instruction have distinct and not necessarily compatible histories. Those who are suspicious of distance education are often reacting primarily to computer-based models of learning as being impersonal and as involving little or no contact between instructors and students; they are being met with the argument that contemporary online technologies can be very personal and very interactive. Network-based technologies build learning communities, it is claimed, create opportunities for historically marginalized voices to enter into the conversation, and can facilitate the development of student-centered classrooms [3].

Unlike cassette, video, and television-based distance education, web-based distance education provides students with access to the world's best instructors and information sources without them having to set foot on campus [4]. Tapping into the interactive capabilities of computers, proponents of distance education argue, will make off-campus instruction more active than the lecture-based, passive learning model of the traditional classroom.

Koschmann, Kelson, Feltovich, and Burrows maintain that educational reform is critical because of the dozens of studies that reveal that existing educational systems are producing individuals, who fail to develop a valid, robust knowledge base; who have difficulty reasoning with and applying knowledge; and who lack the ability to reflect upon their performance and continue the process of learning [5]. The educational reform is occurring at the institutional level due to the rapid growth of and approaches to education, in addition to the university's increased "focus on responsiveness to learner needs and desires such as convenience, timing, engagement, application of knowledge to the workplace, and learning by doing. This urgent student orientation, however, has been linked directly by many to transformative technologies and their potentials. For example, the potential for distributed access to instructional materials, interactive simulations, and friendly hypertextual information display has made the web seem an ideal environment for student-centered active learning.

Research on the complex relationship between learners and alternative web-based learning environments surely requires extensive elaboration. How such environments augment, enhance, or impede learners, and how their previous experiences and learning styles interact with tools designed to support student-instructor, student-student, and student-content interaction is a considerable challenge. And how the design of our web based environments anticipate different learner backgrounds and knowledge, support learner tasks and engagement, facilitate learner communication and collaboration, and present subject matter meaningfully are all dimensions of teaching online.

III. INTERNET USERS IN INDIA

I-Cube, an annual syndication from IMRB International reports that continuous growth in the Internet adoption has been witnessed for the Internet in India. With increase in user base, the growth rate has reduced compared to previous years and reached at approximately 25% as on September 2008. This has resulted in increase in claimed Internet users to 57 millions as on September 2008. This growth is attributed to the variety of online applications like online communication, information search, user generated content as well as online entertainment applications like gaming.

TABLE I
INTERNET USERS IN INDIA

Year	Internet Users	% to Total Population
2001	9,000,000	0.7
2002	16,500,000	1.6
2003	22,500,000	2.1
2004	39,200,000	3.6
2005	50,600,000	4.5
2006	40,000,000	3.6
2007	42,000,000	3.7
2008	57,000,000	4.2
2009	81,000,000	7.0
2010	81,000,000	6.9

Source: IMRB Syndication

IV. INTERNET ACCESS POINTS

Over the years, cyber cafes dominated Internet market in India and have been the leading point of access. In year 2008, 58% of Active Internet users have accessed Internet using cyber cafes. This is followed by Internet access through office (37%), home (33%) and others.

TABLE II
INTERNET ACCESS POINT

S.No	Access Point	%
1	Cyber café	58
2	Office	37
3	Home	33
4	Friends	19
5	School	17
6	Cell Phone	4
7	Government Kiosk	0.6
8	Wi- Fi hot spot	0.2

Source: I cube, 2008, IMRB Syndication

V. STUDY FRAMEWORK

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) systems have come a long way since its inception and its journey has witnessed the evolution and adoption of different 'generations' of technology all over the world. The technologies that are currently used in ODL are print, audio and video broadcasting, teleconferencing, computer aided instruction, e-learning and online-learning and computer broadcasting and web casting. These technologies have co existed together without replacing each other and is used in different combinations in distance education systems across the world. Open Distance Learning has witnessed three phases of development and change starting with 'correspondence teaching' before shifting to 'multi-media teaching' and finally to 'information, communication and teaching.' With the proliferation of communication technologies in the beginning of this century, ODL witnessed a convergence of information, communication and teaching [6].

This study focuses on the distant learners in India. Sampling for this study has been derived from the mass enrollment from Tamil Nadu area, a southern state of India. Learners were chosen from dual mode universities, private universities, Tamil Nadu Open University and IGNOU. The main focus of the study is to examine the coverage and appropriation of students support services and learning aids. It explores two aspects: the facilities available and the awareness and use of such services. It includes, self-learning materials, face-to-face counseling, multimedia learning materials, e-learning, radio and television services etc. While exploring the student's perspective on these learning aspects, it is important to understand the perspectives of the teachers. Two different interests are visible among the teachers. Majority of the teachers support face-to-face counseling. However, the young teachers are in favour of online learning and multimedia supports in teaching.

VI. METHODOLOGY

Students enrolled for the post graduate degree in social sciences have been chosen for the study. In total, six universities of different types have been chosen for the study. These include national, state, public dual mode and private

dual mode universities. The study has been conducted among the 120 students. The major variables are male, female, rural and urban categories. The size of the sample was based on proportional selection in relation to these categories. The profile of the study group is as follows:

TABLE III
PROFILE OF THE STUDY GROUP

Institution	No of students	Male	Female	Rural	Urban
IGNOU	20	12	8	6	14
TNOU	20	14	6	12	8
Dual Mode (Public-I)	20	13	7	12	8
Dual Mode (Public-II)	20	15	5	13	7
Dual Mode (Private-I)	20	14	6	14	6
Dual Mode (Private-II)	20	16	4	9	11
Total	120	84	36	66	58

Students who enrolled in distance education were drawn from six institutions. From each institution 20 students were chosen for the study. 20 students were drawn from Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). 20 students were drawn from Tamil Nadu Open University (TNOU). 40 students from two dual mode public universities and 40 students from private dual mode universities were selected. The profile of the students further categorized into gender and area. In total 120 students were chosen from six universities providing distance education.

VII. FINDINGS

This study focused two aspects in relation to teaching and learning components. The first is to know the level of awareness and the second is to know the actual utilization of such components. The teaching and learning components include the student support services, attending face-to-face counseling, using of multimedia learning aids, using website, radio and television programmes, e-learning materials etc. Two important observations have to be mentioned here: one is the awareness and the other is actual participation. The result of the 120 students is as follows:

TABLE IV
LEVEL OF AWARENESS

Institution	F2F	Tele-conference	Website	Gyan Vani	Gyan Darshan
IGNOU	20	14	18	18	18
TNOU	20	4	18	14	15
Dual Mode (Public-I)	20	3	14	12	13
Dual Mode (Public-II)	20	3	14	12	13
Dual Mode (Private-I)	20	2	12	8	9
Dual Mode (Private-II)	16	2	10	2	2
Total	116	28	86	26	28

The awareness of available teaching and learning components shows significant variations across the different types of universities. The awareness is high in all aspects among the IGNOU students. Except IGNOU, the other universities mostly provide self learning materials in print

version and face to face counseling in the form of week-end classes. Interestingly, these universities make use of multimedia, radio and television programmes of IGNOU. Moreover, some students used self-learning materials as well. In fact, the awareness about such learning components is nothing but the materials produced by the IGNOU.

TABLE V
LEVEL OF PARTICIPATION

Institution	F2F	Tele-conference	Website	Gyan Vani	Gyan Darshan
IGNOU	18	2	18	4	4
TNOU	16	2	16	3	4
Dual Mode (Public-I)	16	0	14	3	3
Dual Mode (Public-II)	14	0	14	2	3
Dual Mode (Private-I)	16	0	12	1	1
Dual Mode (Private-II)	2	0	8	0	0
Total	92	4	82	13	15

Though the students were aware of support services and learning components, there were obstacles in participation. In the face to face counseling, most of the students attended the sessions. They believed that the participation would help them to prepare assignments and to prepare for the term-end examinations. Except in one university where the students were aware of the counseling session of other universities, they could not find the actual classroom venues. It was reported that face to face counseling sessions were not conducted regularly and adequately.

Coming to the actual utilization of students support services, printed version of self-learning materials is still popular among the students. Besides, face to face counseling to explain such materials and to clarify the doubts of the learners is popular. The technology enhanced learning components such as teleconference, audio and video learning materials in the form of CD, and e-learning are yet to get momentum.

TABLE VI
UTILIZATION OF TEACHING-LEARNING COMPONENTS

Institution	SLM	F2F	Tele-conference	Multi-media	e-learning
IGNOU	20	18	2	2	2
TNOU	20	16	2	2	0
Dual Mode (Public-I)	20	16	0	1	0
Dual Mode (Public-II)	20	14	0	1	0
Dual Mode (Private-I)	20	16	0	1	0
Dual Mode (Private-II)	12	2	0	0	0
Total	112	92	4	7	2

The study shows that out of 120 students, 112 students utilized the self-learning materials and 92 students attended the face-to-face sessions or personal contact programmes or classroom lectures. Only four students participated in teleconference sessions. Using of audio and video CDs of

learning materials is also very low as seven students availed this facility. Participation in e-learning is still low as 2 students made use of that mode of learning.

V. CONCLUSION

The study reveals that face-to-face sessions still more popular in distance education in India. At the same time the awareness about website is high. Using audio and video learning aids, radio and television is somewhat prevailed among the IGNOU students. Non-IGNOU students also make use of those learning facilities. This study shows the promising entity of face-to-face sessions among the students. This is partly accountable on the part of instructors who mostly favour face-to-face sessions. The low level of participation in online and other multimedia learning aids is due to inadequate infrastructure. However, there is a possibility that the future generations will show promising inclination towards online instructions in large scale if the infrastructure is strengthened. Institutions and instructors must have their changing attitudes towards receiving the technology oriented outcomes.

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