

Is E-learning the Future of Distance Education?: An Analysis of some Issues and Challenges with Special Reference to Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University

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Abstract—Electronic learning or E-learning is nothing but education based on modern methods of communication including the computer and its network, audio-visual materials, search engines, electronic libraries and websites. Generally this form of education is delivered through the medium of World Wide Web by utilising the Information and Communication Tools (ICT). This form of web based delivery system is widely used in the conventional mode of educational system. However, its usability in the field of distance education has seen a major turnaround in the past decade. The integration of digital technologies like Computer Aided Instruction (CAI) and Web Based Training (WBT) to the distance education palette has produced new models of learning, resulting in a richer and more interactive class environment.

This paper mainly intends to find out the impact and implication of e-learning in distance learning system and whether it could replace blended learning in the near future. This paper also aims to analyse about the feasibility of delivering web based learning system to distance learners by laying special emphasis on the course delivery mechanism of Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University. This University has been taken as a case study because the University uses a mixture of digital and print based course delivery mechanism. The use of E-portal, online courses, social media, mobile learning etc. facilitate the teaching-learning process, thereby accelerating the speed of delivery of the learning materials to the distance learners in the shortest possible time. The use of new technologies- both synchronous and asynchronous technologies have made distance education courses more convenient and better suited to the needs of the learners.

Keywords: E-learning, Information and Communication Technology, Distance Education, Blended Learning

1. INTRODUCTION

The buzzword in communication today is technology. It becomes even more relevant when communication takes place over long distances and across countries. The Open and distance Learning system has grown by leaps and bounds ever since the first Open university in the world was established in

UK – The UK open University way back in 1969. Distance education owes much of its explosive growth over the last decades to its responsiveness to the needs of an older, non-traditional students population. Distance education helps students overcome such barriers as full-time work commitment, geographic inaccessibility, the difficulty of obtaining child or elder care, and physical disabilities. There is also the advantage of convenience and flexibility. The reach and access of technology enabled distance courses is bound to grow on a wide scale. Educational technology is looming as a preeminent force in open learning system. The development of interactive multimedia learning environments has made learning more interactive and informative. It has fostered the advancement of active-learning pedagogies in teaching.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of the paper are –

- i. To assess the use of ICT in Open and Distance educational system
- ii. To analyse the problems and prospects of using e-learning in ODL
- iii. To find out whether e-learning learning can replace other conventional methods of learning in distance education
- iv. To make an assessment of the present ICT tools used by the distance learning universities/institutes with special emphasis on Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open university

3. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The present study is basically a qualitative analysis of the emerging E-Learning technologies that are used in ODL system and its future prospects. The study is based on observation method. Document analysis of secondary sources

has been done to substantiate the fact that emerging e-learning technologies or the web tools help in delivering the coursework to the distance learners under open and distance learning system. Data has also been analysed from secondary sources like websites, newsletters, journals, magazines, books etc. In order to analyse the importance and the future prospects of delivering learning materials and learners support services in digital learning environment, Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU) has been taken as a case study. The main reason for selecting KKHSOU as a case study is the fact that it is the first and the only state open university of North East India making use of both traditional and IT based teaching-learning methods.

4. ICT IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

The practice of distance education has been catching up very fast in all countries- developed, developing or underdeveloped, socialist or capitalist, western or non-western. Technology has assumed an increasingly important role in the evolution of distance education. When we think of e-learning, our mind veers towards the use of internet, intranet/extranet, audio or video tape, satellite TV and CD-ROM. It can be self-paced or instructor-led and includes media in the form of text, image, animation, streaming video and audio.

Taylor (2001) has identified five global generations of distance education technology as given below :

I. First generation : Correspondence Model

This is the earliest form of distance education where structured instructional materials were given to the learners either by post or in person. This was based on sound principles of learning and instructional design, postal correspondence, and occasional face-to-face, radio or telephone contact lessons.

II. Second generation : Multimedia Model

This generation was marked by developments in communication and information technologies benefitted from developments in communication and information technologies. Though printed materials are still being used, yet most of the distance learning institutions adopted multimedia systems like audio-visual aids, computer supported learning, interactive video, among others.

III. Third Generation: Tele-learning Model

In this model mostly conferencing – audio, video and computer – is used to facilitate human contact and human interaction, both synchronous and asynchronous.

IV. Fourth generation: Flexible Learning Model

In the fourth generation model, flexible learning system was introduced. Technology has narrowed down the gap between the teachers and the learners. The emergence of virtual universities has been one of the turning points of this model.

V. Fifth Generation: Intelligent Flexible Learning Model

The fifth generation introduced automated and dynamic student access and response/advice systems through “multiple

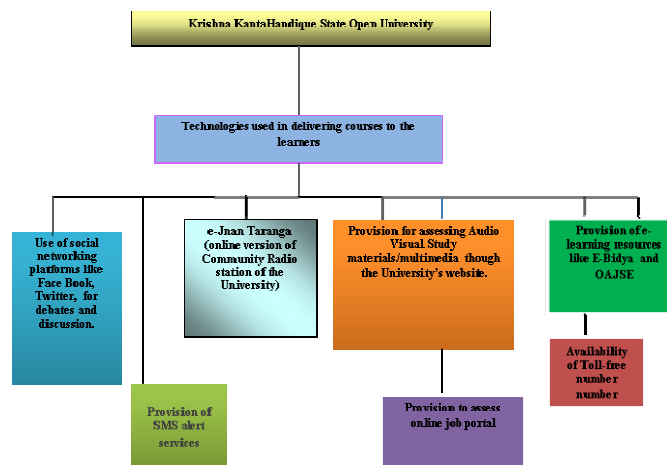
types of media outputs from a single source document”. This not only provided enhanced flexibility and freedom to the learners but also reduced cost considerably.

In the present context both the fourth generation and the fifth generation learning models are widely used in distance learning.

Thus, distance education has been perceived as a powerful means to utilize telecommunications technology for dissemination of teaching experiences and ideas, information, production of two-way exchanges between the teacher and the learner, as well as bridging time and space limitation.

5. DELIVERING LEARNERS’ SUPPORT SERVICES THROUGH DIGITAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AT KRISHNA KANTA HANDIQUI STATE OPEN UNIVERSITY (KKHSOU)

The Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU) which was established under the provision of the Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, Act 2005 enacted by the government of Assam is the only State Open University in the entire north eastern region of India. The university uses blended learning for imparting knowledge to the learners. Though the University is yet to make use of the more advanced form of technologies like cloud computing, Some of the ICT based tools that widely used at the University have been illustrated in the form of a diagram given below –



Source: Diagram prepared by the author

a) Learning through community radio : Community radio was launched on 28th January, 2009, but it was officially launched on 20th November, 2010. Known as Jnan Taranga, the radio can be heard at 90.4 MHz. The community radio is an important platform for the broadcast of educational programmes which includes debates, discussions and talk shows.

About 789 programmes have been prepared by the Multimedia Production Unit of the University so far with special focus on

issues like health & hygiene, women empowerment, rights of the children, environment and bio-diversity, career counseling, sports, legal issues, governance, youth programmes, agriculture and live presentation by the communities on the live issues etc. Community based programmes constitute over 60 % of the total broadcast of the 'Jnan Taranga'.

b) Provision of E-Resource and E-Learning Portal : The central library of KKHSOU maintains an E-Resource Portal. Journals, Dictionaries, Thesauruses, Encyclopaedias and E-books are available at the respective site. One can access the different online journals at JSTOR and JGATE databases. Apart from the one can gain access to the SAGE journals. The **Open Access Journals Search Engine (OAJSE)**, (<http://www.oajse.com/>) an Open Access E-Journal Portal of Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University provides access to innumerable journals and articles to numerous academicians and learners.

The Open Access (OA) E-Journal Portal of KKHSOU provide access to over 4,100 Open Access Journals. An *e-learning portal* by the name of *E-Bidya* has been set up where study materials of different subjects have been uploaded. **The audio and audio-visual learning materials have been uploaded in the website of KKHSOU for easy accessibility.**

The website of the KKHSOU has facilitated the downloading of important materials like home assignments, admission forms, old question papers, important notices of the University etc.

c) Availability of toll free number : The university has made provision for a toll free number which has been in use from the academic session 2011-2012 (i.e from 1st January, 2011). The number has been named as 24 x 7 Learner Support Services. Learners can call at this number for any queries where an automated voice message will reply back to the learners. It is an automated voice response system.

d) Interactive Radio Counselling : KKHSOU in collaboration with All India Radio has made provision for holding interactive radio counselling for the benefit of the learners. sessions are held on every fourth Sunday in a month where experts from the university are invited for clarifying the queries of the learners. Usually queries are related regarding the course structure, examination, self-learning materials, admission procedure, introduction of new courses, learners' support services etc.

e) Audio visual aids : The university also has made provision for distributing has CD's in to the learners along with the Self-Learning materials (SLMs). Such audio-visual aids will definitely go a long way in making learning more interactive and interesting. The use of pictures and sounds would generate interest in the minds of the learners which would otherwise have made learning monotonous.

f) SMS alert services : SMS alert facility is a part of mobile learning system where learners can subscribe for up to date news and other announcements of the university. Learners can subscribe as free SMSs via email and in a Reader. The people who subscribe to the email alerts get updated about the examination routine, syllabus etc.

g) Social media as a platform for interaction : Information about the functioning of the University, examination routine, course curriculum etc. are easily available through various social networking platforms like Face book and Twitter. The members of the social network can post comments or start a discussion on any topic of interest.

h) Availability of online job portal : In order to create awareness among the masses about the different job opportunities, KKHSOU job portal was inaugurated in 2013. Within a period of two years, it has been able to garner the support of the learners who have given positive feedback regarding its functioning. Its importance can be gauged from the fact the portal won the 5th e-North East Award for the year 2014 in the category of e-livelihood and enterprise.

i) Provision of online programmes : KKHSOU has made provision for delivering online programmes in the field of Master of Business Administration and Master of Computer Application. Thus, learners can enroll into the online programmes whereby materials and other support services will be specifically delivered to them via online mode.

Thus, it has been seen that KKHSOU uses online learning tools along with the conventional mode of instructional delivery in the form of study materials. E-learning tools like E-Bidya, social media platforms like twitter and Facebook indeed reach to a wide audience. Library services, mobile learning services, radio counseling, community radio and interactive voice response system provide a wide array of resources where the learners can access within the shortest possible at the shortest possible time.

Of course, the learners do face their share of problems like power shortage, low internet connectivity, feeling of isolation and lack of instructors to provide guidance to them. Almost all communication and technological tools require steady supply of power to function effectively which unfortunately is not available in some remote areas. The problem of dearth of instructors crops up because most of the time the learners are on their own and they don't attend regular classroom like those in the conventional system of education.

Plans are afoot for introducing videoconferencing facility in the next few months. This would greatly benefit the learners as they can engage in discussions with another person while being geographically separated.

6. PROSPECTS OF TECHNOLOGY BASED EDUCATION IN DISTANCE MODE:

Thus integrating ICT into Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system has a lot of advantages and the prospects look bright as indicated in the following points below –

- i. **Cost effectiveness:** Technology enhanced higher education is cost effective as the costs incurred on classroom facilities, electricity, textbooks, library facilities, human resources etc are reduced.
- ii. **Less time consuming:** The time that is required for delivery of technology based education is less time consuming as it is delivered at a much faster rate unlike the face to face teaching of the conventional mode.
- iii. **Networked community:** Networking is a means of building community and a strong sense of community is often the key to building viable network-linked educational programs and resources and sustaining them over the long term. They create network environments that are conducive to interdisciplinary and collaborative activities and to research projects that explore an ever-expanding scope of resources.
- iv. **Convergence of technologies:** The rise of new forms of educational technology has resulted in convergence of different forms of electronic media.
- v. **Reduction in illiteracy:** The learners can be encouraged to learn and grasp the basic fundamentals of online or web based learning. This will go a long way in reducing illiteracy to some extent.
- vi. **Creating scientific temperament:** Emphasis on technology enhanced higher education will lead to a creation of scientific temperament in the minds of the learners. The learners will be encouraged to learn new technologies and sharpen their mindset.

This proves on the whole that such IT based learning have far reaching consequences on the learners as a general and on the society as a whole. In order to deliver an effective learner centric curriculum, the online tools can be integrated with other conventional methods like face to face counseling, self-learning materials, laboratory and library facility etc.

7. CONCLUSION

The ideal instructional technology for a distance learning programme depends on the particular needs of the organization, as well as its financial means. In reality,

however, the ideal technology may not be one technology, but rather a combination of different tools. Technology enhanced distance education can go a long way in building up a networked community where resources can be exchanged via the web at the minimum possible time. In the case of Open and Distance Learning Institutions, technological development is crucial to ensure sustainability, oppose competition and manage threats. However, in the developing world, the financial implications of technological development become a serious challenge in endeavours to keep abreast of latest technology, but more so to innovate and lead technological development. Although it can be cost-saving when applied correctly, these technologies are quite expensive. Collaboration among ODL institutions and the sharing of resources might be a viable option to address some of these financial challenges.

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