

A CONCEPTUAL STUDY ON THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESS OF VIRTUAL LEARNING AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The current era is characterized by rapid changes resulting from scientific and technological advances, including information technology. Keeping up with these changes is necessary in the education system to cope with problems that may arise from them, such as the large volume of information and increase in the number of learners, coupled with teacher shortages. These changes in science and technology ushered in many new teachings and learning methods, such as Virtual learning, particularly in research and self-development areas and a revolution in information technology, which has virtually turned the world into a global village.

Virtual Learning is defined as learning that is provided electronically through the internet, an internal network. It is considered among the most modern learning methods and has been associated with many advantages. Among these advantages are its ability to resolve the problem of knowledge explosion and growing demand for education address the problem of overcrowded. Since the COVID -19 pandemic has disrupted the normal lifestyle of people across the globe, the virtual world has come to the rescue. Amongst many, Higher Educational Institutions have also shifted their base to virtual platforms to conduct classes online.

Consequently, catering to the needs of all stages of education, online education has emerged as an alternative to ordinary face to face classes. In this scenario, it becomes vital to analyse the positive and negative impacts of Virtual Learning besides estimating the intensity of student's knowledge enhancement and skills development through these Online Learning modes.

This study the effects of Virtual Learning on the extent of Knowledge enhancement and Skills Development through Online teaching modes highlights the pros and cons of knowledge & skills gained by higher education students through these initiatives and promotes reflection; this may in turn help many higher education institutions to improve the methodologies used Online teaching and thereby improvise the quality of their graduates.

Virtual or online learning provides various channels such as mail, online chat and video conferences, through which students and instructors can interact with each other. In the classroom, there is only one channel to communicate with each other. Many students have a visual memory and seem to learn more willingly and are interested in online modes of teaching. Virtual learning is opted these days due to the shutdown of schools and institutions. It is beneficial to an extent because it does not require waking up early, there is no fear of getting scolded and one can study in a comfortable manner. But, a teacher-student relationship can be best established in a classroom only. The interaction and the questions a student ask the instructor in the class cannot happen in an online interaction. Virtual learning offers a good substitute to classroom learning in the time of emergency but it cannot replace the classroom. Classroom learning still remains the main option as discipline can be taught through it and it is a better mode of imparting education and knowledge.

a. International status

Since Covid-19 challenge was a world-wide phenomenon which invaded many international countries, during which many higher education institutions had to adapt to online teaching modes the research and findings of this study could be related globally.

b. National Status:

Similar situations and conditions of Online Teaching Methodologies and Challenges, being faced in many parts of our country, this study becomes highly relevant to the national level of applications.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The world is undergoing rapid changes in the knowledge landscape. With various dramatic scientific and technological advances, such as the rise of big data, machine learning, and artificial intelligence, many unskilled jobs worldwide may be taken over by machines, while the need for a skilled workforce, particularly involving mathematics, computer science, and data science, in conjunction with multidisciplinary abilities across the sciences, social sciences, and humanities, will be increasingly in greater demand.

Education is fundamental for achieving full human potential, developing an equitable and just society, and promoting national development. Providing universal access to quality education is the key to India's continued ascent, and leadership on the global stage in terms of economic growth, social justice and equality, scientific advancement, national integration, and cultural preservation.

Qualitative Knowledge enrichment and skills progression of students is now increasingly becoming important for the higher educational institutions, and quickly spreading as an emerging theme, as the institutions have realized that great benefits can be achieved by providing high quality education to the satisfaction of various stakeholder groups. Hence this Study which aims to analyse the impacts of Virtual Learning on the quality of teaching learning practices that paves way for knowledge and skills up gradation, upon the stakeholder's benefits, research attitude and Progressive institutional culture, becomes inevitable.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF VIRTUAL LEARNING

All educators approach this new paradigm with varying degrees of enthusiasm and concern. Are you optimistic or skeptical about Online Learning? Are you interested in knowing how delivering courses online can improve your teaching and offer unprecedented learning opportunities for your students, or do you want to know what you will be up against as you plan and deliver your classes online? It is important to consider both the pros and cons of online learning so you can be better prepared to face the challenge of working in this new environment as well as embrace the new opportunities that it has to offer.

Strengths:

There are many reasons why online programs have become a popular form of distance learning in higher education today. The online environment offers unprecedented opportunities for people who would otherwise have limited access to education, as well as a new paradigm for educators in which dynamic courses of the highest quality can be developed. Here is a list of some of the major benefits of online programs:

Flexibility as a Benefit of Virtual Learning

Among the many advantages of an online education, you'll find virtual classrooms are great for people who are advancing their education while working. In a traditional classroom, lectures will be scheduled at a specific time of day and your schedule will be formed around the availability of classes. If you're currently employed and courses aren't available after your working hours, it can be difficult to juggle a course load in addition to your work duties. When attending a virtual campus, online learning allows for far more autonomy in deciding your own schedule. That means you can study whenever it's convenient for you. Live with some noisy roommates? Having more control over your schedule also means you can avoid distractions easier. Because your schedule isn't dictated by classes, you can spend more time doing the things you want. That might mean focusing on your career or spending time with your family. All you need is a digital device and an internet connection, and you have access to the necessary tools to further your education and earn your degree.

Anywhere...

The main advantage of asynchronous online learning is that it allows students to participate in high quality learning situations when distance and schedule make on-ground learning difficult-to-impossible. Students can participate in classes from anywhere in the world, provided they have a computer and Internet connection. In addition, the online format allows physically challenged students (and teachers) more freedom to participate in class. Participants access the Virtual Classroom through their computers instead of having to "go to class" physically.

Anytime, Any Pace...

The Virtual Classroom is accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Time efficiency is another strength brought by the online learning format. Asynchronous communication through online conferencing programs allows the professional juggling work, family, and study schedules to participate in class discussions. There is no question about doing the work; just do it at the times that are more convenient. Students can access their courses at any time of day or night. Further, they have continuous access to lectures, course materials, and class discussions. This is particularly convenient for those who may need to reread a lecture or take more time to reflect on some material before moving on.

Synergy

The online format allows a dynamic interaction between the instructor and students and among the students themselves. Resources and ideas are shared, and continuous synergy will be generated through the learning process. Each individual can contribute to the course discussions and comments on the work of others. The synergy that exists in the student-centered Virtual Classroom is one of the most unique and vital traits that the online learning format possesses.

Cost Advantages of Online Learning

Education can be expensive, but virtual learning can provide a number of ways for students to save. Not having to commute to campus can help you save on transportation costs. It also means saving time because you don't need to travel to-and-from campus.

Every year, the average student spends more than a thousand dollars on textbooks and course materials. Virtual coursework often takes advantage of virtual resources, which translates into less money spent on textbooks.

Tuition costs can also vary between online and on-campus programs. For instance, at Drexel University, students enrolled in online programs in the School of Education receive a 25% discount

off the price of regular tuition. Most online programs offered by the school are also financial aid eligible.

Between all these sources of savings, cost cutting can be an enormous advantage of virtual learning. Plus, in the event of inclement weather, you don't have to worry about being able to make it to class, or about your classes being unexpectedly canceled. However, if there is a power outage and you're unable to access the internet as a result of weather conditions, there may be difficulties with missing a scheduled online class, but it may be easier to make it up.

High Quality Dialog

Within an online asynchronous discussion structure, the learner may reflect on comments from others before responding or moving on to the next item. This structure allows students time to articulate responses with much more depth and forethought than in a traditional face-to-face discussion situation where the participant must analyze the comment of another on the spot and formulate a response or otherwise lose the chance to contribute to the discussion.

Advantages of Virtual Learning with Course Variety

Among the many educational benefits of virtual learning, some are easier to identify. Online courses allow you to earn essentially the same range of different degrees that can be earned from a traditional educational environment. That includes learning certificates and professional certifications to master's degrees or doctoral degrees. Integrating coursework with technology provides a number of advantages. Rather than waiting days or weeks after exams, you can often get immediate feedback. Where a traditional lecturing leaves you at the mercy of your best note-taking skills, video presentations can be watched and revisited as necessary. Students who find their focus suffers from classroom activity may benefit from online classes. Students who aren't as assertive may have better opportunities to participate in class discussions when communicating online. Working from your own choice of environment, with self-paced learning, the result can be a more personalized learning experience.

Student Centered

Within an online discussion, the individual student responds to the course material (lectures and course books, for example) and to comments from other students. Students usually respond to those topics within the broader conversation that most clearly speak to their individual concerns. These situations result in smaller conversations taking place simultaneously within the group. While students should read all of their classmates' contributions, they actively engage in only those parts of the dialog most relevant to their own interests. In this way, students control their own learning experience and tailor the class discussions to meet their own specific needs. Ideally, students make their own individual contributions to the course while at the same time taking away a unique mix of relevant information.

Level Playing Field

In the online environment, learners have a certain measure of anonymity. Discriminating factors such as age, dress, physical appearance, disabilities, race, and gender are largely absent. Instead, the focus of attention is clearly on the content of the discussion and the individual's ability to respond and contribute thoughtfully and intelligently to the material at hand.

Career Advancement Opportunity Benefits of Virtual Learning

Just like courses taken in a traditional classroom setting, virtual learning can provide you with a number of career advancement opportunities. But online students have better opportunities to

collaborate with international classmates, and often have more individual contact with other students. Students may also receive more one-on-one time with their professor with virtual learning, which is beneficial for both learning and networking. Because you're the master of your own schedule, students of virtual learning are better prepared to continue working while pursuing academic credentials. And for students who aren't employed, academic work can serve to explain any discontinuity or gaps in a resume. In either case, the advantages of virtual learning can be clearly seen on a resume.

Access to Resources

It is easy to include distinguished guest experts or students from other institutions in an online class. Furthermore, today's students have access to resources and materials that may be physically located anywhere in the world. An instructor can compile a resource section online with links to scholarly articles, institutions, and other materials relevant to the course topic for students to access for research, extension, or in-depth analysis of course content material.

Creative Teaching

The literature of adult education supports the use of interactive learning environments as contributing to self-direction and critical thinking. Some educators have made great strides in applying these concepts to their on-ground teaching. However, many classes still exist which are based on lectures and rote memorization of material. The nature of the semi-autonomous and self-directed world of the Virtual Classroom makes innovative and creative approaches to instruction even more important. In the online environment, the facilitator and student collaborate to create a dynamic learning experience. The realization of a shift in technology creates the hope that those who move into the new technology will also leave behind bad habits as they adopt this new paradigm of teaching. As educators transform their courses to take full advantage of the online format, they must reflect on their course objectives and teaching styles. Many of the qualities that make a successful online facilitator are also tremendously effective in the traditional classroom.

Weaknesses of Virtual Learning

While online programs have significant strengths and offer unprecedented accessibility to quality education, there are weaknesses inherent in the use of this medium that can pose potential threats to the success of any online program. These problems fall into the following main categories:

TECHNOLOGY

Equity and Accessibility to Technology

Before any online program can hope to succeed, it must have students who are able to access the online learning environment. Lack of access, whether it be for economic or logistic reasons, will exclude otherwise eligible students from the course. This is a significant issue in rural and lower socioeconomic neighborhoods. Furthermore, speaking from an administrative point of view, if students cannot afford the technology the institution employs, they are lost as customers. As far as Internet accessibility is concerned, it is not universal, and in some areas of the United States and other countries, Internet access poses a significant cost to the user. Some users pay a fixed monthly rate for their Internet connection, while others are charged for the time they spend online. If the participants' time online is limited by the amount of Internet access they can afford, then instruction and participation in the online program will not be equitable for all students in the course.

Computer Literacy

Both students and facilitators must possess a minimum level of computer knowledge in order to function successfully in an online environment. For example, they must be able to use a variety of search engines and be comfortable navigating on the World Wide Web, as well as be familiar with Newsgroups, FTP procedures, and email. If they do not possess these technology tools, they will not succeed in an online program; a student or faculty member who cannot function on the system will drag the entire program down.

Limitations of Technology

User friendly and reliable technology is critical to a successful online program. However, even the most sophisticated technology is not 100% reliable. Unfortunately, it is not a question of if the equipment used in an online program will fail, but when. When everything is running smoothly, technology is intended to be low profile and is used as a tool in the learning process. However, breakdowns can occur at any point along the system. For example, the server which hosts the program could crash and cut all participants off from the class; a participant may access the class through a networked computer which could go down; individual PCs can have numerous problems which could limit students' access; finally, the Internet connection could fail, or the institution hosting the connection could become bogged down with users and either slow down or fail altogether. In situations like these, the technology is neither seamless nor reliable, and it can detract from the learning experience.

THE STUDENTS

While an online method of education can be a highly effective alternative medium of education for the mature, self-disciplined student, it is an inappropriate learning environment for more dependent learners. Online asynchronous education gives students control over their learning experience and allows for flexibility of study schedules for non-traditional students; however, this places a greater responsibility on the student. In order to successfully participate in an online program, students must be well organized, self-motivated, and possess a high degree of time management skills in order to keep up with the pace of the course. For these reasons, online education is not appropriate for younger students (i.e. elementary or secondary school age) and other students who are dependent learners and have difficulty assuming responsibilities required by the online paradigm.

THE FACILITATOR

Lack of Essential Online Qualities

Successful on-ground instruction does not always translate to successful online instruction. If facilitators are not properly trained in online delivery and methodologies, the success of the online program will be compromised. An instructor must be able to communicate well in writing and in the language in which the course is offered. An online program will be weakened if its facilitators are not adequately prepared to function in the Virtual Classroom.

An online instructor must be able to compensate for lack of physical presence by creating a supportive environment in the Virtual Classroom where all students feel comfortable participating and especially where students know that their instructor is accessible. Failure to do this can alienate the class both from each other and from the instructor. However, even if a virtual professor is competent enough to create a comfortable virtual environment in which the class can operate, still the lack of physical presence at an institution can be a limitation for an online program. For the faculty as well as the participants, such things as being left out of meetings and other events that require on-site interaction could present a limiting factor in an online program.

The Administration and Faculty

Some environments are disruptive to the successful implementation of an online program. Administrators and/or faculty members who are uncomfortable with change and working with technology, or feel that online programs cannot offer quality education, often inhibit the process of implementation. These people represent a considerable weakness in an online program because they can inhibit its success.

Sometimes administration cannot see beyond the bottom line and look at online programs only as ways to increase revenues and are thus not committed to seeing online programs as a means of providing quality education to people who would otherwise not be able to access it. In such a case, an institution that is not aware of the importance of proper facilitator training, essential facilitator characteristics, and limitations of class size would not understand the impact that these elements can have on the success of an online program.

THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

Levels of Synergy

Online learning has its most promising potential in the high synergy represented by active dialog among the participants, one of the most important sources of learning in a Virtual Classroom. However, in larger classes (20 or more students), the synergy level starts to shift on the learning continuum until it eventually becomes independent study to accommodate the large class. At this point, dialog is limited as well as interaction among participants and the facilitator. The medium is not being used to its greatest potential.

What Should Not Be Taught Online

Even with recently generated excitement and enthusiasm for online programs, it is important to recognize that some subjects should not be taught online because the electronic medium does not permit the best method of instruction. Examples include: hands-on subjects such as public speaking, surgery, dental hygiene, and sports where physical movement and practice contribute to the achievement of the learning objectives. These subjects are probably best taught in a face-to-face traditional learning environment. Hybrid courses may represent a temporary solution to this problem, thus making that portion of the course more accessible to a greater number of people who would otherwise have difficulty getting to campus. However, solutions of that sort still underline the fact that online teaching cannot satisfy all educational needs and goals. Just because it may be technologically possible to simulate a physical learning experience, this does not necessarily mean that it is the best way to teach it.

THE CURRICULUM

The curriculum of any online program must be carefully considered and developed in order to be successful. Many times, in an institution's haste to develop distance education programs, the importance of the curriculum and the need for qualified professionals to develop it are overlooked. Curriculum and teaching methodology that are successful in on-ground instruction will not always translate to a successful online program where learning and instructional paradigms are quite different. Online curriculum must reflect the use of dialog among students (in the form of written communication) and group interaction and participation. Traditional classroom lectures have no place in a successful online program. Education of the highest quality can and will occur in an online program provided that the curriculum has been developed or converted to meet the needs of the online medium.

CONCLUSION

There are many advantages to virtual learning that can help you sharpen your skills and grow in your career. Courses taught online provide the college students the flexibility to learn on their own schedule, instead of a mandatory class time. Virtual courses give students more selection in their courses. In a face-to-face setting, courses taught at the same time for students to choose between courses they like. Today is a very exciting time for technology and education. Online programs offer technology-based instructional environments that expand learning opportunities and can provide top quality education through a variety of formats and modalities. With the special needs of adult learners who need or want to continue their education, online programs offer a convenient solution to conflicts with work, family, and study schedules. Institutions of higher education have found that online programs are essential in providing access to education for the populations they wish to serve. In order for an online program to be successful, the curriculum, the facilitator, the technology, and the students must be carefully considered and balanced in order to take full advantage of the strengths of this format and at the same time avoid pitfalls that could result from its weaknesses.

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