

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology
of Egypt / Egyptology

CHALLENGES OF ONLINE LEARNING: DIGITAL INEQUALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIA

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Gauri Shikha Gogoi, Surajita Bora -- Challenges Of Online Learning: Digital Inequality In The Context Of India -- Players-Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 18 (4), ISSN 1567-214x

Key words: India, Digital inequality, online learning.

ABSTRACT:

The 21st Century is the era of science and technology where the world has witnessed the possibilities of the shift from the traditional mode of learning to digital or online learning. In India also, the acceptance of online learning has been spreading very fast due to its accessibility, affordability etc. The government of India is supporting online education because of its potential to improve the quality of education and has made efforts to make digital learning available to students in every corner of the country. But in the developing countries like India, It is still not becoming possible to provide proper digital infrastructure to each and every individual of the country. This paper attempts to study the advantages and disadvantages of online learning in India highlighting digital inequality as its one of the major challenges.

Key words: India, Digital inequality, online learning.

INTRODUCTION

Education is the act or process of imparting knowledge, values, morals, beliefs, skills etc. of an individual. If we look back to the 10 to 20 years from now, The process of imparting education has gone through a notable transformation in India. The rapid growth of technology has brought a tremendous change to the traditional method of learning and online learning has emerged as a necessary resource in the field of education. Although the face to face education is still considered as the norm, the acceptance of online learning has been spreading

very fast in all the spheres of life including education. But The online learning experience so far has identified some issues specially in the period of Covid-19 pandemic. This paper attempts to highlight the issues related to online learning.

ONLINE LEARNING :

Online learning is a form of learning process that takes place over internet or electronic technologies to access educational curriculum outside a traditional face to classroom environment. It is defined as “ learning experiences in Synchronous and asynchronous environments using different devices (e.g., mobile phones ,laptops etc.) with internet access. In these environments students can be anywhere to learn and interact with instructor and other students.”(Singh and Thurman,2019) (Dhawan, 2020). It encompasses a range of technologies such as worldwide web, internet, chat, texts, audio and video conferencing delivered over computer networks with the purpose of imparting education. Online learning requires a great availability of resources where teachers act as instructor rather than transmitters of content knowledge and ICT is regarded as physical resources to enhance interest and learning experience of the students.

In India the learning system was traditional for a long time. But the educational needs don't remain the same. These needs are changing and a global education is imposing itself and has been forcing the Indian education system to undergo many changes. As a consequence of these changes, online learning is gaining popularity in India and is being touted as game changer by providing access, equity and quality in education. The effectiveness of online-learning mainly depends on ICT infrastructure and internet penetration. At present, India is having good ICT infrastructure and strong internet accessibility. So the education sector in India is also no longer bound to face to face teaching –learning process. According to a recent study in a global level online learning programme, India has been reported to have the second highest number of online course enrolments with more than over 1,55,000 students from the country. There has been a significant push towards digitalisation or online learning from both the government and private sector due to its potential to improve the quality of education and reach through the digital India initiative. Government of India with association with the Ministry of Human Resource Development has initiated many programmes such as Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing(DIKSHA), Swayam Prava, MOOC courses on SWAYAM portal, E-PG Pathshala, National Repository of Open Educational Resources etc. to enhance the availability of resources for online learning.

ADVANTAGES OF ONLINE LEARNING:

1. **Variability of Online Tools :** There are plenty of online tools available which are very important for effective learning environment. The Instructors can use audio, visual and text material to reach out to the students . This is also helpful in creating a collaborative and interactive learning environment where students can give immediate feedback, ask their confusions and learn effectively.
2. **Accessibility:** One of the most important advantages of online learning is that it allows learners to attend classes from anywhere at any time. It is also beneficial in crisis-like situation. If we take the example of Covid-19 pandemic , in the time of these pandemic the educational institutions were closed for a long time. And online learning was becoming necessity specially in the lockdown period.
3. **Saves money and time:** Online learning is much more cost effective than traditional classroom learning. Because, there is a great savings on hostel and transportation fees along with the expenses of books. Since the students are allowed to learn at their own time it also saves their time.
4. **Self –Pacing :** As it provides all the course material beforehand students can learn by taking their own time.
5. **Personalised learning:** Every student has different learning style . In a traditional classroom where everyone taught together, many students find it difficult to follow the same instructions. Because some students are comfortable with visual learning while some students prefer to learn through audio. Online learning solves this issue. It is the best way to create a perfect learning environment suited to the needs of all students by providing a huge range of options and resources of learning.
6. **Ease of doing courses for working professionals:** People who are engaged in job often struggle to continue their ongoing education into their busy schedule. Online education provides them the opportunity to learn through online mode from any place at any time as they can't leave their job to pursue education instead of having interest. Online education offers them a variety of courses to choose according to their needs and interest.

CHALLENGES OF ONLINE LEARNING:

There are a lot of challenges faced by the people in online learning in India. Some of these challenges are-

1. **Requires a Good Grasp of Technological skills:** Learning from a online platform requires the learners to understand online technology. It is not just about knowing how to get the

online learning site or how to download the online learning materials. In this process, the learners need to know to direct the screen. This may be easy for the frequent users. But for the beginners, it may be stressful and consumes more time at the beginning of the course.

2. **Technological issues:** Since online learning is completely dependent on proper internet connectivity and functional systems of electronic devices, technological issues can occur in online mode of learning that make it difficult to complete the courses in time. While internet facilities has grown in India over the past few years, in some areas consistent internet connection with decent speed is yet not available.. Without a good internet connection there may be a lack of continuity in this process for both the instructor and learner.
1. **Limited social interection :** Learning in a face to face classroom is more interesting and more involving .In online learning though there exists the opportunity to discuss and interact with their instructor but they do not get the social contact. In the online mode of education the guidance of instructors and interaction with peers is greatly reduced.
2. **Issues related to instructor:** One of the major limitations of online learning is technological knowledge and experience of the Instructor. It requires the instructors to be technologically up-to-date. But in India it is a challenge for teachers to move from offline mode to online mode by changing their teaching strategies and instructional methodologies.
3. **Computer anxiety :** Anxiety refers to the natural responses of human body to stress. Online learning may sometimes arise computer anxiety among the learners and the instructors who are not perfect in managing computer functions properly. It leaves the user specially the beginners in an uncomfortable mental state where they experience some physical and emotional symptoms.
4. **Negative impact on health:** In the time of learning through online mode the learners must have spend so many hours staring at a electronic screen. Spending a long time in screen is one of the biggest concerns and disadvantages of online learning as it increases health hazards such as- eyestrain, bad posture etc.
5. **Limited to certain disciplines :** Online learning is not suitable for all the disciplines. It tends to be more suitable for social science and humanities rather than the practical disciplines like medical science and engineering etc.

Digital Inequality –A inevitable challenge of online learning in India :

Online learning is a very useful medium through which India can attain the goal of reaching each and every corner of the country, encouraging the learners for higher education as well

as women empowerment through education. Instead of having so many advantages there exists a lot of difficulties in implementing effective online learning all over the country. The online learning experience has so far thrown up some issues specially in the period of covid-19 pandemic. Since, social distancing is preminent at this period, online learning has become a necessity. The rapid change to online learning encouraged by the pandemic has highlighted the issue of digital inequality in India. In a developing country like India, there exists issues like digital disparities among its states or among different regions of the country due to several socio economic and other factors. Digital inequality refers to unequal distribution in access to, use of, or impact of Information and Communication Technologies and internet facilities on the basis of gender, locality, region, economic criteria etc. This digital inequality is one of the major challenges of effective online learning process. The rural areas of India has been suffering from additional obstacles due to its digital enequality . Many rural areas remain out of range for internet service. According to the NSSO (National Sample Survey Office) conducted between July 2017 and June2018 only 4.4% rural households have computer facilities against 14.4% households in urban areas. In case of Internet facility, only 14.9% rural households having access to the internet against 42% households in urban areas of India. According to GSMA'S 2020 mobile gender gap report, Gender gap in access to technology is also a huge problem in India. In India, only 21% of females are mobile-internet users while 42% of men have access to internet. The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020 released by GSMA shows that while 79% men own a mobile phone in a country , the number of women who have mobile is 63%. (Pandey, 2020) . At present, the Government of India has put a lot of efforts and has taken many initiatives such as TDIL(Technology Development for Indian Language, Digital Libraries Project, Bharat Net etc., but there is a lack of proper implementation mechanisms in the policies or projec to execute them. So there is a crucial need to re-evaluate the implementation strategies of the digital projects and need of focus on decent internet connectivity for the students.

Conclusion :

Learning online is different from learning in traditional classroom. We are well aware about the effectiveness of online learning. The Government of India has put a lot of efforts and generated and transmitted online content, but for effective online learning it is very important to make sure on which extent the content is reaching the learners. It can be highly effective alternative method of learning and can change the whole future scenario in education ,if it can be implemented in

joint collaboration with educational institutions, government and industry.

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