

ICT, TEACHING -LEARNING PROCESS, INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE STATE

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Abstract

Everybody across the ideological divide agrees to the need of quality, access and equity in higher education today. The development of the Knowledge Economy has put tremendous pressures on the higher education systems and the existing institutional arrangement is incapable at present to meet these pressures. The unprecedented growth of the technology, particularly the ICT in these decades has provided enormous opportunities as well as challenges for the teaching-learning process and for higher education. But technology in itself cannot achieve equity or quality in Higher Education. Higher Education system is not autonomous of the political-economic system in which it exists. So the use of technology depends on the nature of the system in which it operates. But technology has the potential to bridge the existing long gap in learning. Already it has redefined the teaching –learning practices. But the biggest challenges in the way of using technology are to use it as an effective tool to bring inclusiveness in higher education. Use of ICT needs to be transformed from a specialised skill to a universal skill for all learners. So far availability of ICT in teaching-learning practices has been exclusive, reinforcing the existing inequalities in higher Education in India. ITC needs to be integrated into teaching –learning process and it requires redefining the role of teachers. The state has a bigger role to play in both these tasks, providing universal access to technology to all kinds of learners, particularly the marginalised and empowering the teachers to use ICT in the teaching-learning process. This paper is an empirical study on the impact of ICT on learning experiences of the girl students, their response to it, and the responses of the students who are deprived of these facilities and on the possibilities of its future use and impact in a university in Odisha, India. The interview method was used with an open ended questionnaire. The sample was selected from all socio-economic groups to make it inclusive. The analysis of the empirical data shows that the use

of ICT in teaching-learning process only reflects the existing socio-economic divide. Unless policy interventions will be there to make it inclusive, it will lead to digital divide.

Introduction

The communication revolution worldwide over the last few decades is an established fact today for which the world today is globalised one in real sense. The impact of this revolution is all pervasive on almost all aspects of human existence. ICT has become an important part of most organisations and business these days. (Zhang and Aikman, 2007) Thus Education simply cannot remain insulated from this development. The traditional environment of learning do not seem to be suitable for preparing learners to function or be productive in the workplaces of current times. (Yelland, 2001) Thus, many argue that technology in learning can help students and teachers develop the competencies required for the 21st century. (Bransford et al. 2000) But the bigger question is how the education system can be improved in terms of its quality, access and equity through the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Higher Education Systems are not and cannot be autonomous of the socio-economic system in which they operate. They only reflect the characteristics of the broader system in which they operate. But this cannot be taken as a mathematical formula. The socio political, cultural and economic dynamics of the society influences the process. Education, particularly the higher education has the potential to bring radical changes in not only empowering learners but in challenging effectively the inequalities and oppressive systems existent in societies. Under the same logic it can be said that ICT in itself cannot bring radical changes in higher education systems unless they are used with an inclusive policy frame work. Use and access to ICT in higher education is decided as per the norms, characteristics and nature of the system which controls it. Everybody accept ICT as a significant resource in education to bring quality, equity and to expand access in education. The QINGDAO Declaration of the International Conference on ICT and post-2015 Education had the slogan, ‘Seize digital opportunities, lead education transformation’ (UNESCO conference in Qingdao, China, 23-25 May, 2015) that set the agenda for the states and civil society in the use of ICT in education. This historic declaration should be the guiding principle for the states as it clearly defines the goals of the use of ICT in education as ‘inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning by 2030, strengthening education systems, knowledge dissemination, information access etc.’ (UNESCO conference in Qingdao, China, 23-25 May, 2015) But how the states are using it to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) is crucial for coming decades.

ICT and Teaching-learning

Teaching Learning process is the substance of education. Learning experiences of the learner leaves a lasting influence on him. It defines the purpose of education. It becomes more relevant for post-colonial societies faced with the challenges of Nation building. Both teaching and learning are complementary to each other and they constitute integral parts of the whole. The emergence of ICT as a major tool in the teaching learning process is capable of redefining the process itself and the very objective of Education. ICT is not just the use of computers, projectors, e-learning, mobile learning, net connectivity, smart class rooms and so on. It may also mean the decline of the presence of the human element that is the teacher in the class room and in the entire teaching learning process. The design of the curricula may not have a teacher to explain and the human element may be replaced by the technology. On the other hand use of ICT has the potential to bring radical changes in expanding the access to higher education, particularly for the marginalised in the society. The lack of institutions and institutional facilities in higher education, particularly for the learners with geographical, social, economic, gender disadvantages, can be addressed by a judicious use of ICT in the

teaching learning process in higher education. Thus ICT by itself cannot bring positive changes in Higher Education and in the teaching learning process. The important questions are how it will be used and for whom it will be used. Whether its availability should be inclusive or not? Its use should not alter the very purpose of education in developing countries like India that is the constitutional project of nation-building and modernisation. This is relevant in the context of education becoming a marketable product in the neo-liberal discourse.

The purpose of the paper is to study the experiences of the girl students of a women's university towards use of ICT in higher education and its impact on their learning experiences and then to situate the findings in the broader context of higher education system in India and particularly in the state of Odisha where this university is situated. With more than three thousand students studying in both post-graduate and undergraduate courses, the university reflects the aspirations of the girl students from all classes and social groups. The social composition of the students is representative as more than sixty percent of the students are from poor, SC, ST and Backward Communities. More than 20% of them are from remote districts. About 40% of the students are first generation learners and are from the most disadvantaged sections. This is why this institution was selected for study. 489 students were interviewed with open ended questions covering students from all background (Socio-Economic) and all streams (science, social science and commerce as well as PG and UG). Out of the total students interviewed, 29% belong to SC, 16% to ST and rest 55% to general and backward community category. Questions were on their socio-economic status, knowledge of the use of ICT, their use of ICT in their learning, their access to ICT, impact of ICT on their learning experiences, role of teachers, their expectations, their suggestions in this regard. Apart from these questions to the learners the study tried to map the access to ICT at the institutional level, teacher's use of ICT in teaching, Government's initiative in this regard to have a holistic view on the issue. Here it is relevant to mention that the state government of Odisha promotes e-governance and has implanted several schemes at the governance level for quick, transparent delivery of public services. In the Higher Education sector it has implemented e-admission in the entire admission process in higher educational institutions in the state. It has brought significant changes stopping manipulations and developing a uniform admission calendar for the entire state. The entire process is transparent and is managed by the higher education department. Other parts of the administration in the higher education like despatch of letters, movement of files etc are also carried through e-governance. The point is that students entering to higher education are acquainted with technologies when they seek admission through online application and don't have to go to institutions of higher education for application for admission. This phenomenon is surely advantageous to the students with geographical economic disadvantage. But the students have to pay while submitting online applications using private facilities. The students in the periphery though face difficulties like lack of continuous electricity supply etc, this programme is largely successful.

However, these facilities do not have a direct bearing on the teaching learning process in higher education in Odisha. Before analysing the findings of the study a mention must be made of the facilities of ICT in Institutions of higher education in the state. Some of the important institutions have Wi-Fi campus, but their number is negligible. Every Government Degree College and many Govt. Aided Degree Colleges have provisions for Smart Class Rooms but virtually they don't function in reality. Computers per learner are almost unavailable in colleges and there is also disparity in this regard in terms of rural and urban divide. Projectors are there in majority of the colleges but they are rarely used in regular classes. Net connectivity is not present in all colleges and learners have no or very limited

access to it. But purely private and commercial institutions of Higher education are more advanced in terms of their provisions of ICT for learners than the govt. or govt. aided colleges. This is one of the major reasons of attraction to the learners. This proves the acceptability of ICT as a pre-condition of modern learning. But it simply excludes those who don't have the capacity to afford learning in these institutions. The cost is almost 70 to 100 times higher for general students and 200 times higher for marginalised sections like women, dalit and tribal students. Two important things become prominent from this analysis, The ICT operate as per the dynamics of the system in which it exists and access to these facilities is limited by the existing inequalities.

The Findings from the Responses of the Interviewed Learners

- 467 students (95%) of the respondents are aware of the ICT like e-learning, mobile, net, website, e-library, television study programmes, teleconferencing etc. More than 53% of them are from poor and disadvantaged sections. The respondents from upper strata have knowledge about advanced ICT.
- 465 students agree that teaching learning will be pleasant through ICT but all (467) say that they do not want to have classes only through ICT minus the presence of teachers.
- All of them use net and other sources of ICT to complete their project which is mandatory for them. They download learning materials in preparing their project and find it interesting.
- 160 (33%) students have access to advanced mobiles with net facility.
- All agree to have this facility and feel lack of confidence for not having it. The university does not have provisions for computers with net facility for all students.
- Smart class rooms are rarely used.
- Seminars with projects create enthusiasm in all students and all want to learn that.
- All want to learn basics of computer.
- All want availability of learning materials through ICT in the university on a free basis.
- 30% of them have never used computers on their own and this creates a sense of inferiority in them.
- 89% of them want a combination of both traditional and modern teaching and learning through ICT.
- Poverty is the single most important reason of their incapability to have access to ICT on their own.
- Visually challenged Students face more difficulties in this regard.
- Most of the teachers have knowledge of ICT and agree that it can enhance teaching experiences. But none of them uses in class rooms on a regular basis. They are not so enthusiastic about this.
- 92% of the teachers are not interested to use it immediately if provided with such facilities.

Analysis

Analysing the responses is difficult for various reasons but still common patterns can be found. There is a growing urge among the young learners to know and use ICT in their learning experiences. This will also help them in their future. This will enhance their engagement in the learning process. The needs of the deprived sections can be addressed through expanding access to ICT in higher education. ICT and its use in higher education will be helpful in bridging the gender gap in higher education. But the most important thing is to

make public-funded higher education system central in the total system and provisions of ICT by the state. Otherwise the existing inequality in the access to ICT will be reproduced. Technological literacy is the first step to tap and use the potential of ICT in teaching learning process in higher education. State must take initiative to satisfy the needs of the marginalised sections. The presence of multiple forms of deprivation in a backward society like that of Odisha is a challenge for achieving inclusiveness in higher education. But this can be transformed into an opportunity by inclusive use of ICT to expand access and equity in higher education. Neither traditional teaching learning process nor the exclusive use of ICT in it can be the answer on their own. Both need to be used to produce amazing results to bring quality in teaching and learning. So far state has failed to break the ice. The private players have used this in expanding their market in higher education and this is exclusive in nature. The barriers in the way of integration of ICT in teaching learning should be mapped first and then the state should provide access to ICT in public-funded institutions of higher education. Denial of access to ICT in higher education amounts to denial of right to education in this modern age of communication. It creates lack of confidence among the learners and incapacitates them in the job market. Teachers need to be sensitised and trained as they are the leaders in this process. There should be capacity building programme for the teachers. It will enhance their quality as well as the quality of teaching. ICT in teaching and learning is beneficial and there is a need of positive inclusive policies as well as investments by the state. In its absence, private players will seize the opportunity to exploit the situation for profit. This will only accelerate the process of commoditisation of higher education. The current scenario is unique in the sense that there is the use of huge numbers of mobiles and mobile learning can be a powerful tool in targeting the needs of the higher education of the learners in inaccessible areas as well as for life-long learning.

Thus, there is no alternative to the use of ICT in the teaching learning process in higher education at this point of time in our history. Its positive impact is beyond question. What is needed is its use in broader framework of inclusive policies. Given the hegemony of neo-liberal policies in higher education today which are exclusive in nature this is a big challenge. The state and the civil society should work together to achieve the constitutional goals of equity and justice to build an inclusive system of higher education. Use of ICT will be a powerful tool in realising this goal. But its use should not lead to a digital divide. This has to be ensured by the state through its interventions at the policy level.

(The study was conducted in the academic session of 2017-18. Despite changes, the article was not updated to maintain the originality of the empirical data.)

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