E-LEARNING: THE TOOL FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract:

The magnetism of the Internet has changed the way we think, act, do business and in recent times even the way we educate ourselves. Today the world has recognized the enormous potential of Internet in almost every field of life.

Internet has become a revolutionary word in the field of education. It is one of the most significant tools in educational technology. E-learning today is the latest catchphrase of the education industry. With Internet as a medium, today's learning and training is not confined to mere classroom sessions. What Web-based Learning offers is a 'global classroom' where in knowledge can be shared across geographical, cultural and psychological boundaries. E-learning can be simply described as learning and training available through Internet or World-Wide-Web or Web-Enabled-Learning. It also includes the education provided through CDs as well. It is expected that, the learning will be highly enhanced and enriched to a large extent by this tool. Effective, reliable and low cost communication system, from almost all parts of India, has opened up new innovative alternative avenues for the education through not only to Conventional Education System but also to the Open and Distance Education System.

This paper highlights on E-learning, Objectives, Recent technology, Interactive tools, Pros and cons of online learning, Internet scenario in India, E-learning and women empowerment. It mainly stress on the need for E-learning and how it acts as a tool for their empowerment.

Keywords: *E-learning, Women Empowerment*

E-LEARNING

What is E-learning?

As opposed to the Computer Based Training of the 1980s, the term e-learning is most frequently used to refer to computer based training which incorporates technologies that support interactivity beyond what would be provided by a single computer. E-learning, therefore, is an approach to facilitate and enhance learning through the use of devices based on both computer and communications technology. Such devices can include personal computers, CD-ROMs, Digital Television and Mobile Phones. Communications technology enables the use of the Internet, email, discussion forums, and collaborative software. E-learning may also be used to support distance learning through the use of WANs (Wide area networks), and may also be considered to be a form of flexible learning where just-in-time learning is possible. Courses can be tailored to specific needs and asynchronous learning is possible. Where learning occurs exclusively online, this is called online education. When learning is distributed to mobile devices such as cell phones or PDAs, it is called M-learning.

Why E-learning?

Studies have shown that e-learning produces a 60 per cent faster learning curve than traditional instruction. Despite e-learning being a relatively recent phenomenon, the cost-efficient and result-effective aspects of computer-based training are no secret.

Many more conventional and non-conventional media are available through which learning can happen. Then why one should consider E-learning? This is mainly because of knowledge exploration at lightning speed. So learners need to learn more, better and faster to cope up with the latest up-to-date knowledge. Face-to-face teaching and learning with supportive media also has some limitations. "E-learning" can help a teacher to substantially improve active participation of students by allowing him/her to focus on dissemination of knowledge, as a facilitator and guide. "E-learning" is a system that can empower both, learners and teachers, for quality education and that too, efficiently. Teachers can clearly communicate more in less time using rich multimedia. In Open and Distance Education System (ODES), certain minimum quality standards can be easily maintained at all study

centers. In E-learning, heavy emphasis on print media will be reduced but totally not eliminated for the delivery of learning material. Role for other media like audio, video, multimedia, etc. is substantially increased but still only supportive.

"E-learning" can provide much more freedom to learners regarding place and time for learning. This flexibility makes learning an attractive activity particularly for housewives and employed students

Objectives of E-learning

"E-learning" aims to provide excellent learning support to the students, which is as good as face-to-face teaching. This support will be available anywhere anytime on the Internet. Master trainers will prepare in advance, clear multimedia presentations in modular form on the web. These presentations will offer much better learning effectiveness and quality due to clarity of communication and interaction during discussions or tutorials with real teachers and fellow students. Textbooks written in self - instructional format, which are suitable for self-study, are still the primary media due to its convenience of use. In addition to this, "E-learning" is highly cost effective, without compromising with quality. Hence, objectives of E-learning may be summarized as follows:

¨   Effective Learning,

¨   Improved Quality,

¨   Reduced Duration,

¨   Cost Effectiveness and

¨   Flexibility

What technologies are used?

Delivery Media	Interactive Tools
- Print (texts, study guides...) - Audio (streamed, tapes) - Video (streamed, video, cable TV) - Data (web pages, CBT computer files, online tests, interactive tools)	- Asynchronous (Email, Listservs, Web Forums, Newsgroups, BBS) - Synchronous (Chat, shared whiteboards, teleconferencing, videoconferencing.

E-Learning can make use of a wide range of technologies and media. These technologies can be categorized by delivery media or interaction tools. It is also important to realize that each learner will often learn best with certain technologies.

Delivery Media & Technologies:

Print:

- Textbooks, Study Guides, Workbooks - Are still very common in online learning courses.

Audio:

- Streaming audio - Used to deliver the instructors comments over any network.
- Audiotapes - Could be mailed to students.

Video:

- Streaming video - Can deliver video over any network.
- Videotape - Could be produced and mailed to students.
- Cable TV - Course segments can be produced and aired in various locations nationwide.

Data:

- Web Pages - A very common form of delivering content.
- CBT Content - Often delivered via CD-ROM, but also deliverable via a network.

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- Computer files - Can be emailed or downloaded from a server (word processor, spreadsheet, presentation, database, etc.).
- Online Tests - Computer scripts can be written to deliver a variety of test formats.
- Interactive Tools - The following tools can also be used to deliver content to learners.

Interactive Tools

Asynchronous:

- Email - Used for questions and discussion.
- Listservs - Basically email to everyone in the class or section at once.
- Web Forums - Also called discussion forums or bulletin boards. They are probably the most common form of interaction in online courses.
- Newsgroups - Public forums that use the Usenet system.
- BBS - A computer bulletin board that you dial, and use like a web forum + email + file transfer.

Synchronous:

- Chat Rooms - Can be either moderated by an instructor of un-moderated for class use.
- Shared Whiteboards - Allow class members to write on the same digital whiteboard.
- Application Sharing - The same program and file can be shared for demonstration or collaboration.
- Teleconferencing - Could be used to deliver instructor audio, or for collaboration.
- Videoconferencing - Either from expensive, high quality, dedicated systems, or from less reliable desktop versions.

What are the pros and cons?

As more and more learning providers begin to deliver learning online, and more and more instructors and students experience online learning a clearer list of pros and cons will be possible.

Potential Pros of Online Learning:

- No time spent commuting to class

- No travel costs

- You can have a job while you take classes

- You can learn when you need it (Just-In-Time)

- Your learning options are not constrained by your geographic location

- You can learn at your own pace

- Learning can be fit into your busy schedule

- Can be more effective for certain types of learners (shy, reflective, language challenged, those that need more time)

- Often more student to student interaction

- Can be more focused on the learner and less on the instructor

- Instruction can be more customized and flexible (especially CBT)

- Can lower costs for both learning providers and organizations that need training

- Often less costs for students than traditional programs

- Side benefits of learning new technologies and technical skills

Potential Cons of Online Learning:

- Instructors need to learn to be effective online instructors

- Hard for instructors to move traditional content online

- More time consuming for instructors to provide individualized feedback

- Equipment needs of students and learning providers

- Technical training and support of learners and instructors

- Academic honesty of online students

- Types and effectiveness of assessments

- Lack of face to face interaction

- Equity of access to learners of all backgrounds and parts of society

- Requires new skills and responsibilities from learners

- Does not provide many social aspects of a true campus or traditional classroom

Internet Scenario in India

Today, India has recognized enormous potential of Internet in almost every field of life. Emergence of new technologies helped to initiate the process of speedy and better connectivity, higher access to information and critical understanding of phenomenon. Internet has brought revolution in the field of education system. Now Internet based methodologies

are used in conventional and also non-conventional education systems for training and teaching/learning process. "Electronic learning" or "E-learning" is becoming more and more popular.

In near future, Internet access or connection will commonly be through telephones and through TV sets. This may lead to further major jump in the use of Internet especially in the education industry. The growth in Internet users is restricted to major cities and capital towns compared to rural towns and villages.

With all the challenges that India is facing in education and training, E-learning has a lot of answers and needs to be addressed seriously by the countries planners and private industry alike. In the knowledge economy the chief competitive advantage of nations is not their physical assets be it land, natural resources or even oil but quality and skill of their people. If it is used effectively E-learning can reach to all sectors of society.

Problems with conventional education in India

As the world's second most populous nation India also has the distinction of having the world's largest illiterate population. With a population in the learning age group of 18-32 of roughly 350 million, the country's educational infrastructure like schools, colleges, labs and even roads leading to schools have hardly kept up. Yet there is a far bigger problem that affects the quality of education in our country. Teaching as a profession is a choice of few young men and women. As a result there is an acute shortage of good teachers in our country. Often inexperienced, not so competent teachers are employed many a times with poor quality of teaching. However on the other side we do have our younger generation far more enthusiastic and committed towards education.

E-learning solution

Fortunately, E-learning has the answer to all of these issues.

• A few good teachers can be scaled up to teach thousands of students. Besides, recorded classrooms can be a real boon. Recorded classrooms of the best teachers and you have whole population benefiting from the expert teachers. Faculty availability is not restricted by geography or even time.

• With high quality study material already available any time, students are better prepared in the class. Their absorption level goes up. Besides collaborative tools like discussion boards and chat sessions helps collaboration among students and between students and teachers. This is also supplemented by email support. The suite of E-learning tools has been designed to replicate all aspects of the classroom learning experience and others unique to the online medium. This helps impart a complete learning experience.

• One can always study the playback of recorded sessions. Even the slow students in the class can catch up with the rest of class.

• Interactivity is better. All the study materials are prepared in advance including white boards; hence the teacher spends more time with students.

• Due to scalability, and ubiquity E-learning is far more cost effective than traditional learning.

• Removes the bias of sex, religion, colour, cast etc. In fact the option of anonymous feedback on pacing and comprehension eliminates conventional classroom inhibition that prevents students from telling the teacher "I haven't understood".

E Learning and Women Empowerment

"Computer literacy should not be restricted only to the usage of computer. What is needed is the provision of learning tools such as comprehensive e-learning packages on various subjects with illustrations to make the learning interesting and productive," Women constitute one half of the world's population and a visible majority of the poor. Women either solely or largely support an increasing number of families. Projects aiming to improve the living conditions of the poor cannot, therefore, be effective unless women participate in their formulation and implementation, as contributors as well as beneficiaries.

Although women are the main providers of basic services in poor settlements, their key role remains largely unrecognised. Gender discrimination is worse in the rural areas. Economic opportunities for women are correspondingly bleak. There are a number of Self Help Groups (SHGs) and Women Empowerment Projects (WEP) of women in India that have been recognized as an effective strategy for the empowerment of women in rural as well

as urban areas. The government has been and is still offering computer literacy to many such groups. Women are trained in certain courses like DTP through which they can start earning.

To enhance such opportunities women get to empower themselves, the government could plan a network system that would operate from one place. Through this network system e courses could be disseminated to the different SHGs and WEPs. Starting from basic gardening and cooking to marketing and banking, anything that would serve as a fruitful source could be taught to them.

The involvement of voluntary organizations, associations, federations, trade unions, non-governmental organizations, women's organizations, as well as institutions dealing with education, training and research is required to initiate such e-learning courses, and participate actively in the process of the empowerment of women.

Women Empowerment is a global issue. Empowerment is an active process enabling women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life (UNDP, 1994). Stromquist (1995) has identified four components of empowerment. They are cognitive, psychological, economic and political. "Empowerment is the process of increasing the capacity of individuals of groups of making choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes" (The World Bank, 2001).

Empowerment of women means equipping women to be economically independent, Self-reliant and having a positive esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation. Education plays the most crucial role in empowering women. It is education that provides knowledge, awareness in regard to social, civic, political, economic and environmental issues and skills for securing employment and means of livelihoods. A big nation like India which consists of more than 50 crores women cannot afford to ignore the role of women in the national development. Empowerment is a continuous process for realizing the ideals of equality, human liberation and freedom for all.

Conclusion

The Web or the Internet has metamorphosed from an information tool of the 90s into an instructional one in the 21st century. E-learning does not just make education easy and

accessible to the vast majority of people on the Indian subcontinent but holds out huge potential for the Indian Women especially, to empower themselves and alleviate their living.

The first step towards development is mass education and here the Net is the driving force. By bringing the Net to the poor, the communities will become knowledge-rich and will get motivated. This can be initiated by installing a computer, or creating a kiosk. If necessary supplement this with a personal instructor. Blend different methods of education, Combine digital technology with software of learning techniques.

"There cannot be an educated people without educated women. If general education is to be limited to men or women, that opportunity should be given to women for then it would most surely be passed on to the next generation" (University Education Commission, 1948-49). In cognizance, E-learning has the advantage of being open, flexible and easily disseminated or distributed. When it is blended according to the needs of the learner, its productivity will reach great heights, thereby empowering the community. E-learning will leverage women's skills and knowledge and make effective use of the latest information technology tools to find better ways to serve their country and the people.

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