

**PROMOTING DIGITALIZATION OF DISTANCE TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS AND USE
OF ICT ENABLED PEDAGOGY FOR DISTANCE LEARNING:
A CASE STUDY FROM INDIA**

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Abstract

Digitalization presently is a process for taking India forward with promotion of use of ICT by the Government of India. This paper focusses on the use of ICT enabled pedagogy for distance teaching-learning of counselling and family therapy post graduate programme being offered by Indira Gandhi National Open University. In the present study, feedback was obtained from experts in the field, learner support centre in-charges, and academic counsellors involved in counselling for theory and practical courses of the modular post graduate diploma and Master's degree programme in counselling and family therapy. Purposive sampling method was used for data collection. It was found that majority of the respondents were in favour of using ICT tools for interacting with the distance learners to bridge the gap felt by the academic counsellors as well as distance learners pursuing counselling and family therapy post graduate programme of IGNOU. The paper highlights the possibility and potential of promoting digitalization of distance teaching-learning process and use of ICT enabled pedagogy for distance education in the context of the counselling and family therapy post graduate programme of the only national open university of India. The paper discusses the need and importance of ICT enabled pedagogy for distance teaching-learning and describes the features and potential of this ICT enabled pedagogy. The difficulties and problems perceived to be faced in using the ICT enabled pedagogy for distance teaching-learning of counselling and family therapy post graduate programme are also discussed in the paper.

Keywords: *digitalization, counselling and family therapy post graduate programme, teaching-learning process, academics, distance learning.*

Introduction

Digitisation or digitalization is that multiplying force in India right now that will have far-reaching implications in bringing about rising financial access and rapid formalisation of the India economy (The Economic Times, 2017). Digitalization as a process had been initiated a few years back in India and is presently seeing a quantum leap in the momentum. According to Wikipedia (2018), digitalization has been defined as the process of converting information into a computer-readable format, that is, digital format, in which the information is organized into bits (computer language). McQuail (2000) pointed out that digitization is of crucial importance to data processing, storage and transmission, because it “allows information of all kinds in all formats to be carried with the same efficiency and also intermingled”.

Indira Gandhi National Open University, the only national open university of India, has rapidly transformed itself to the digitalization process with 100% online admissions and fee collection (IGNOU, 2018). As we all are aware, open and distance learning throughout the world caters to the adult population who due to some reason could not attain higher education through the conventional education system or what we generally say a regular college or university; or those who would like to go in for continuing education. UNESCO (2005) defined open and distance learning (ODL) as an approach that aims to broaden access to education and training by enabling learners to overcome temporal and spatial obstacles and by providing flexible teaching modes that can be adapted for individuals and groups.

About the Curriculum Framework of the Modular Post Graduate Diploma and Master's Degree Programme in Counselling and Family Therapy being offered through Open and Distance Learning System

The Master's degree programme in Counselling and Family Therapy and the Post Graduate Diploma in Counselling and Family Therapy have been launched by Indira Gandhi National Open University through distance mode in modular form. This post graduate level programme of study in counselling and family therapy is for developing professionals in this vital field, which is gaining greater salience in the present times both from social and employment perspectives (IGNOU, 2018). Ratra & Chadha (2017) pointed out that the contemporary social scenario has resulted in an increased need and demand for professional support in terms of counselling and family therapy, which is being increasingly recognized as an effective approach both for promoting positives like strengthening family ties and increasing resilience of individuals in vulnerable situations as well as for addressing negative aspects such as socio-psychological problems, declining mental health, and psychosomatic disorders that are being increasingly witnessed in recent times. As a result, there is a tremendous felt need for education and training in this area (IGNOU, 2018).

The programme structure for the first year of the two-year Master's programme in Counselling and Family Therapy, and that for the one-year Post Graduate Diploma in Counselling and Family Therapy is the same and includes theory as well as supervised practicum courses (IGNOU, 2018). The courses are compulsory, and are enumerated below: -

- I. Human Development and Family Relationships (theory and supervised practicum)
- II. Mental Health and Disorders (theory and supervised practicum)
- III. Counselling and Family Therapy: Basic Concepts and Theoretical Perspectives (theory and supervised practicum)
- IV. Counselling and Family Therapy: Applied Aspects (theory and supervised practicum)
- V. Counselling and Family Therapy: Research Methods and Statistics (theory and supervised practicum)
- VI. Reflective Journal (supervised practicum)

In the second year of the Master's programme in Counselling and Family Therapy, the compulsory courses are as follows:

- VII. Applied Social Psychology (theory and supervised practicum)
- VIII. Counselling and Family Therapy: Applications and Interventions (theory and supervised practicum)
- IX. Internship (supervised practicum oriented)
- X. Dissertation (research oriented)

Apart from these compulsory courses, the student has to choose any one of the following elective courses:

- XI. Marital and Family Therapy and Counselling (theory and supervised practicum)
- XII. Child and Adolescent Counselling and Family Therapy (theory and supervised practicum)
- XIII. Substance Abuse Counselling and Family Therapy (theory and supervised practicum)

Use of ICT enabled pedagogy

Delello, Mcwhorter, and Camp (2015) gave recommendations for educators working with any of the social networking platforms to provide students with “hands-on” training in advance of any assignments to be undertaken by the students through social media, since though teachers assume that students enter the classroom “wired” for technology, certain students still found the use of social media difficult to navigate. Avram (2014) found that use of Facebook in higher education allows for efficient communication among user students, especially in getting answers to their various education-related questions, and even to debate on the concepts taught in their subjects. Serrano & Yambao (2015) pointed out that social media such as Facebook prove to be useful in fostering academic collaboration among students.

Cross, Sharples and Healing (2016) examined the changing study practices of UK distance learning students as they employ, adapt and integrate the use of new portable digital devices such as tablets, e-books and smartphones into their learning. The results obtained in their study indicated that ownership and use of tablet technologies by UK distance learners is nearly 82% while that of US distance learners is 92%. The authors reported a correlation between study reach and ‘study range’ – the number of different types of study tasks performed using handheld devices. They also reported that the use of tablets and smartphones for reading materials has increased by 14 percent and 13 percent respectively between 2013 and 2016, while the use in preparing assignments has increased less for tablets (by 5 percentage points) and remained static for smartphones.

The results of the study conducted by Brady, Holcomb, and Smith (2010) found that Social Networking Sites such as Ning are beneficial in distance education courses as education-based SNS served as a technological tool for improved online communication among students in higher distance education courses.

Jimoh (2013) in a study stated that the Nigerian government should subsidise ODL programmes just like the conventional school system and improve electricity supplies to the nation for betterment of outreach of the ODL programmes in Nigeria.

Potential of Implementation of ICT enabled pedagogy in India

In a country like India, where majority of population still resides in rural India, it is important to note that the reach of both hardware of ICT technology as well as software for ICT technology has to be evident. Only 33.2% of the population resides in urban areas in India (Worldometers, 2018). India has been racing to connect thousands of villages with electricity. As on November 30, 2017, electrification in majority of villages has been completed and electrification in the remaining about 2,217 villages is supposed to be completed by May, 2018 (The Economic Times, 2017). The cyber market in India comprises about 400 million users and is expected to be 650 million users soon (The Indian Express, 2018). India is the third largest internet user after China and the United States of America (Rao, 2015). As is evident, the reach of both electricity in India and internet usage in India is seeing a steady growth. With the number of mobile phone users in India steadily increasing from 2013 onwards, in 2017 the number of mobile phone users in

India was expected to rise to 730.7 million and the number of smartphone users in India was predicted to rise to 340 million and could reach to almost 468 million by 2021 (Statista, 2018). According to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, India's mobile phone subscriber base has reached the one billion users' mark (The Hindustan Times, 2017).

Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study was to explore the possibility of the use of ICT enabled pedagogy for the counselling and family therapy post graduate programme being offered through distance mode by the only national open university in India.

The specific objectives of this study were to ascertain the scope, potential, and challenges of digitalization of distance teaching-learning process and use of ICT enabled pedagogy for distance learning in the context of the said programme. These objectives were sought to be met by seeking the opinion of the experts involved in course design, preparation and delivery of the post graduate level modular programme in counselling and family therapy, regarding the effectiveness of the use of ICT enabled pedagogy for distance-teaching the learners for this programme of study.

Methodology

The qualitative method was used in the present study. Focus group discussions and interviews were conducted to collect the data.

The data was collected from IGNOU Learner Support Centres of the modular Post Graduate Diploma and Masters programme in Counselling and Family Therapy under various IGNOU Regional Centres and the experts involved in the instructional design and development of this programme of study. Data was collected from experts involved in course design and preparation; programme study centre in-charges and academic counsellors involved in taking the academic counselling sessions with the learners for the various theory and supervised practicum courses, internship and dissertation. Sixteen experts were contacted and they agreed to take part in this study. Twenty-three programme study centre in-charges and academic counsellors involved in academic counselling were contacted and they all agreed to participate in this study. The qualitative data collected from all the respondents was analysed by grouping together the responses on the basis of similarity of opinion expressed.

Results and Discussion

Responses obtained from sixteen experts and twenty-three programme study centre in-charges and academic counsellors were collated and grouped. The primary tools of data collection for this study were in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

Data analysis revealed that ICT has the potential of enhancing and adding new dimensions to distance teaching-learning process. It was found that most of the respondents were in favour of using ICT tools such as discussion forums, chat, emails, video calling etc. to facilitate the distance learners, bridge the student-teacher gap as well as reduce the time spent on travel. Some of the respondents were also of the view that due to "distance and travel time involved, many distance learners of counselling and family therapy programme were not able to come for the mandatory supervised practicum counselling sessions and submit their practical files on time" and "at times also preferred to drop-out". The use of ICT will bridge the felt gap among the academic counsellor-learner and bring a paradigm shift towards learner-centric approach and also strengthen the distance teaching-learning process.

Most of the respondents felt that with the increased usage of mobile services by the adults, learners in distance education can be contacted and use of mobile networks be utilized for both sending and receiving SMSs as well as being in touch with both the academic counsellors as well as the peer group.

The participants were unanimously of the opinion that digitalization could be highly facilitative for the learners. Given that at present, the self-instructional printed course material is provided to all learners in the form of blocks (books), it would be useful if the soft copy of the same is also available to the learners. Having the study material in PDF or other learner friendly format easily available to the distance learners can strengthen the concept of distance learning pedagogy of learning anywhere and anytime. The audio and video programmes prepared for the programme of study should also be available to the learners on the University website for any time accessibility to the learners. Further, the formation of discussion forums, posing questions and receiving instant replies and online support to the learners will help in course completion by the counselling and family therapy learners.

All the respondents expressed that time for interactions through such communication media needs to be fixed and also the students need to be trained to use such media and ICT tools. Respondents were of the view that for successful usage of ICT tools, proper training should be provided to the learners on how to use them. The learners should also be sensitized regarding the ethics involved in effectively using the ICT tools for educational purposes. The respondents felt that mere knowledge and personal usage of Skype, Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp, E-mail etc. by the distance learners is not enough for creating an academic interface between academic counsellors and learners. They were of the opinion that many of the learners of counselling and family therapy post graduate programme attending academic counselling sessions at study centres were qualified professionals like doctors, nurses, teachers, etc., a small manual regarding information on usage of the ICT tools for academic purposes would be sufficient. Respondents clarified that this manual on usage of ICT tools should contain information regarding, for instance, how discussion forums should be made, who should be the members, who can participate in it, what can be posted on it as well as what can not be posted, limitations and boundaries of such forums, time to be spent on it, dress code in video calling, background scenario in video calling, ethics and cyberlaw, misuse punishment etc. Such orientation will help in effective usage of ICT enabled pedagogy by both the learners and academic counsellors. Some of the respondents also raised the issue of mass copying of assignments or practicals and a need to evolve mechanisms to check and prevent such problems. The results of the present study also reveal that the respondents were in favour of the experts and academic counsellors being given an honorarium for the time spent in providing quality services through any digitalized mode of communication.

Conclusion

While deciding on digitalization and implementing ICT enabled pedagogy for counselling and family therapy distance learners, issues such as geographical location, level of knowledge and skills to use ICT, availability of infrastructural facilities and requisite resources including availability of electricity and internet usage facilities are major considerations in deciding what ICT tools to use and in what combination. The ICT enabled pedagogy for counselling and family therapy distance learners should also include a course in skill imparting to be able to use ICT tools such as discussion forums, blogs, Skype, WhatsApp or any other.

Indeed, the use of a particular ICT must not only address certain pedagogical concerns, it must aim to bridge the digital divide and democratize access to quality education (Pena-Bandalaria, 2007).

The respondents of this study were firmly of the opinion that digitalization and use of ICT enabled pedagogy would strengthen teacher and learner bonding, encourage interactivity, and help in increasing the success rates in the counselling and family therapy programme. It will certainly bridge the ‘distance’ in the distance teaching-learning process by fostering scaffolding and peer learning. Using ICT enabled pedagogy for counselling and family therapy will support educational endeavors and bring benefits of digitalization by using technology to support student engagement and enrich distance teaching-learning process.

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