

Exploring the opportunities and challenges of digital learning in India

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ABSTRACT

Digital learning has been considered as a novel pedagogical tool and the same holds significant implications for a developing country like India. Digital learning formats may take the shape of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), online educational degrees, YouTube video lectures apart from the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) pedagogical tools in classroom settings like projectors, digital equipments, gadgets, practical instruments, etc. Digital learning assumes importance in India given the fact that there are infrastructural and resource constraints in the country. The present study seeks to underline the opportunities and challenges of digital learning in India and to provide evidentiary support, perspectives from 10 faculty members from a leading school have been taken regarding their experiences with digital learning. Findings from the interviews show that the digital learning in India has provided a conducive environment for the students however the students are unable to come to terms with the fact that doubt clearance is difficult in digital learning formats given the lack of proximity between the students and the teachers. The research paper concludes with directions for further research and limitations.

Keywords: India, Digital learning, Opportunities, Challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Schools have witnessed a remarkable change in terms of the pedagogical formats over a period of time-case in point being the introduction of the digital learning procedures in the country across time and space. Digital learning is different from the conventional learning methods on account of the extent to which the student is physically distanced from the teacher. Whereas it has been argued that digital learning may be enhanced more when complemented with the presence of the teacher in the school settings, there are opposing views regarding the efficacy of chalk-talk-walk formats wherein there is physical presence of the teachers in the brick-and-mortar classroom settings (Blayone et al., 2018). Schools in India have been following a colonial pedagogical format wherein the teacher and the taught have witnessed a kind of bonding with each other given the kind of collectivist cultures in our country. However, over a period of time, there has been an emphasis upon the usage of digital tools for conducting teaching sessions thereby hoping that learning would be facilitated in the long run. Digital learning is better than the conventional learning because the former helps in driving home

the learning concepts in amore lucid manner thereby providing opportunities to the students to refer the same on a 24x7 basis as per their convenience. The present study seeks to present the inferences derived from the 10 faculty members of a leading school regarding the opportunities and challenges of digital learning via YouTube lectures, usage of ICT tools like projectors, digital gadgets, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), etc. in schools. The study concludes with directions for further research and limitations.

Background

It is being considered as a novel proposition that learning in schools should be as innovative and student-friendly as possible. Thus, different experiments are conducted to make learning process more enjoyable and conducive for the students (Marcus-Quinn, Hourigan & McCoy, 2019). Schools are the formative destinations of any child and the manner in which the teacher-student dyad functions determines a lot regarding the manner in which the student learns to pick up the nuances of subjects of his choice. Impact of learning tools and techniques also has a huge bearing on the overall outlook developed by a student regarding how and why a particular phenomenon occurs and this goes a long way in determining the future predilections of a student regarding a particular career later in her life. Conventional learning in the form of chalk-walk-talk has been in vogue since the colonial times and it is proposed that this form of learning builds a good relationship between the teacher and the taught. However, over a period of time when the influx of digital technologies has proliferated across the globe, the impact on teaching has also witnessed a churn. Thus, with the developments in the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) sphere, the digital content has become expansive enough and it has had its marked impact on the classroom settings in the schools and colleges as well (Arguel et al., 2019). Digital learning has become important in the universities as well and has promises for the teachers and the students alike. The proliferation of digital learning varies in developing and developed countries and the concomitant opportunities and challenges also vary depending upon the resources and infrastructure at hand.

Digital learning implies the provision of learning via multiple tools (Ding, Xiong & Liu, 2015). For instance, teachers may record their video lectures on YouTube or other sources for wider dissemination for the students' usage. Likewise, students may be provided the opportunities of taking up MOOCs as a part of their academic assessment. Furthermore, digital tools and techniques are also provided in the classes to supplement the conventional classroom settings wherein the ICT devices are used for providing digital content. Thus, the teacher may use the projector for showing some videos in the classroom or any other gadgets may be used to give the students some kind of simulation experiences.

Digital learning has become popular in India and students are able to refer the content uploaded over the dedicated websites or portals as per their convenience. Digital learning becomes all the more helpful for the students with special needs or for those who are unwell for a period of time. To better appreciate the opportunities and challenges unleashed by digital learning in India, the present study seeks to address the research question: "What are the opportunities and challenges associated with digital learning in Indian schools?"

Research context

For drawing deductions regarding the efficacy and challenges associated with digital learning in India, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 faculty members working in a prominent private school in India. Faculty members were contacted via simple random sampling method and interview protocols were observed while engaging them in the discussions. The faculty members were apprised of the overall objectives and scope of the research study and prior consent was solicited from them. It was mentioned clearly that anonymity of their responses shall be observed and their identities shall not be revealed at any cost. Interviews were conducted at a venue of their convenience and the time slated for the interviews was decided based on mutual convenience. On an average, interviews were conducted within a time span of 35-40 minutes.

Interviews

The first set of interview questions pertained to the opportunities presented by digital learning. Broadly, the perspectives led to three strands as discussed below:

1. Students were able to learn at a time and place of their convenience. Digital learning provided the right environment to the students for learning at any time and everywhere on the basis of their preferences. “Students are very fidgety these days and it is difficult to tame them in classes. Therefore, digital learning formats provide the students the opportunities of learning at their own pace without any pressures from the teachers or the parents”, opined one of the experts. Once the content is uploaded on a dedicated portal or website, the student is free to refer the same at her convenient hours. Students may drop the message to the teachers regarding their doubts and problems and the same may be resolved by the teachers at their convenient hours. “Often, it happens that I am unable to redress the queries of the students at that particular time when they ask me in the classroom hours. I get embarrassed or I am unable to answer the complex questions of the students. Given these problems, it becomes easy when the student conveys her doubts via online message and I can refer the requisite reference material and answer her query accordingly”, said another expert.
2. Digital learning was more efficacious than conventional learning. Students are able to learn in a more expeditious and efficacious manner in digital learning formats than in conventional pedagogical patterns. There are methods of correcting the errors and lacuna in the digital content at any point of time without any delays. Digital learning helps in providing the learning content in a coherent and consistent manner and there is no restriction as far as the tapping of digital content is concerned.
3. Digital learning was cost-effective. As mentioned by one of the experts, “I feel that digital learning is less costly and everyone can afford it.” Students are using mobile devices anyway and there are opportunities for the students to refer the mobile devices as per their convenience. Mobile apps are also available for digital learning and there are apps launched by the schools themselves for a particular class. Mobile apps are available across different levels and the teachers club their reading material in dedicated sections.

As far as the challenges associated with digital learning are concerned, the experts were in concurrence with three ideas:

1. Digital learning leads to students getting undisciplined. As indicated by one of the experts, “students do not respect the teachers the way they do in classroom settings.” This is so because they do not have a fear of teachers in physical settings. In classroom settings, teacher and student are physically in proximity with each other and the student is more disciplined. However, this disciplinary attitude gets diluted in the absence of teachers. The same is also reflected in the views of another expert who expressed concern over the fact that students are liable to turn on their audio devices in the absence of video devices.
2. Digital learning gets distractive. Students are already floating in the sea of social media distractions and in the midst of online learning, the messages pop up from different social media outlets. Instead of turning on the “silent” mode of the digital gadgets or turning off the social media content, students get carried away with the social media realm. Thus, they are liable to get distracted and thus reduce the efficacy of learning environment.
3. There is connectivity error in digital learning. In the face of limited infrastructural issues, the connectivity gets broken and students are unable to hear the video lectures properly. Also, there are instances when the internet connection gets broken and the connectivity between one strand and the next one gets lost.

Conclusion

The purport of the present study was to appreciate the opportunities and challenges associated with digital learning in Indian schools. Digital learning has witnessed a sporadic rise given the differences in the regional development and the associated infrastructural issues and resources (Heider, 2015). Digital learning in schools in India has been welcomed by the students and faculty members alike. However, it remains to be appreciated that there are opportunities and challenges associated with the same. Interviews from the 10 faculty members from schools showed that digital learning needs to keep into account the fact that the environmental and personal factors are important considerations to facilitate the same. The present study was limited in the sense that only interviews were taken from few faculty members of a particular Indian school. Further studies are warranted for appreciating the digital learning benefits and challenges by soliciting perspectives from other stakeholders of the school education system. For instance, parents and policy makers may be contacted for their views on the digital learning question. Lastly, it may be pertinent to appreciate how the digital learning formats are useful or challenging in the colleges and universities as well.

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