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Crossing classroom boundaries with e-learning

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The word education still brings vivid images of organised classrooms with stern lecturers and doodling students to mind. Yet, fact is that learning activities are moving online, away from the traditional classrooms.

This electronically supported learning is a system of applications, processes and communication systems through the internet, computer, audio/video tapes etc., using various media like texts, images, animation and streaming audio/video.

E-learning can take different forms – from synchronous to asynchronous and from self-paced to instructor-led. Emails, blogs and discussion boards are useful for exchanging ideas and information at one's convenience, while synchronised chat, instant messaging and webinars require participants to work together collaboratively.

Self-paced learning offers the flexibility to create one's own study schedules and lends itself well to distance education.

Instructor-led mode recreates the formal class experience on a cyber platform through web conferencing. Students can log into these virtual classrooms and attend classes in real time literally from anywhere.

Learning is facilitated through PowerPoint slides, e-flip charts, software applications, breakout sessions, group discussions, guest speakers, simulations and even gaming.

This presents an interactive environment where students receive direct teaching, have immediate access to the instructor and above all can easily reiterate core messages and concepts anytime with the help of a recording feature.

What's more, there's never a missed lecture as skipped sessions can always be re-viewed.

Mrs. K. Suneeta, Academic Coordinator, KCP Siddhartha Adarsh Residential Public School, Vijayawada, advises, "Instead of limiting to printed manuals and text instructions which are normally confusing, using videos, animations and PowerPoint with colour images create interest in the learner and provide opportunity to pause and rewind and move at their own pace, something a normal class room cannot always offer."

Therefore, e-learning opens new vistas and personalised learning paths which are not possible in conventional classroom settings.

Here, teachers can teach anytime, anywhere and students too are liberated from the confining classes. It is also cost-effective and provides access to people in remote locations as well.

This has led to a boom in online certificate, degree, doctoral and research programmes through the virtual information highway. Even the IIMs and IITs are quickly jumping onto the e-learning bandwagon. Web-based training is again highly preferred by working professionals and for corporate training programmes. Little wonder then that e-learning companies (Educomp, Sify, Deloitte, Magna IT, C&K Management, etc.) are launching innovative e-learning initiatives by the day!

The repercussions

Today, e-learning is quickly entrenching itself into educational systems. But can advancing technology threaten the very relevance of classrooms and schools?

Will teachers become dispensable and textbooks be replaced by e-counterparts?

Well, the academic fraternity can relax as nothing can snatch away the important learning experience of traditional classrooms.

As Professor Ashok Banerjee, IIM Calcutta stresses, “While e-learning might be the need of the hour, teachers cannot be replaced by computers and classrooms cannot be turned into a virtual reality.”

This is primarily because e-learning comes with its own set of drawbacks. It necessitates properly trained staff with enhanced skills and technical knowledge to work with students online.

Instructors have to modify their online pedagogy with interactive lessons that meet student needs along with enhanced communication skills to deliver instructions with greater clarity.

Then there is the problem of communicating content sans the usual contextual/visual cues plus inherent lack of sensitivity to individual learning styles.

Moreover, the responsibility for learning rests squarely on the students – this may stimulate motivated learners, but what about the undisciplined, uninterested ones? Quality of understanding and knowledge absorption varies greatly compounded by lower personal interaction with instructor/other participants.

Mr. Ashokan Pichai, Senior Vice-President, Learning & Development, TalentSprint further points out, “E-Learning can teach but cannot provide guidance like an experienced, understanding teacher can!” Mrs. Suneeta corroborates, “E-equipments need to be treated only as learning aids and can never be a replacement to a teacher. Only a teacher with sound knowledge can bring effectiveness to such use of technology in class rooms.”

“E-learning is the best platform for extensive learning using various resources available across the globe in your desktop. But, a teacher or trainer would remain always indispensable as the class room interaction brings spark that leads to further research through e-learning” says Henry Maris, Secretary, Nazareth Group of Institution, Chennai. Prof. Raja Sreenivasan, Head, Corporate

Relations Centre, Park Global School of Business Excellence, Chennai assures, “There will be schools and colleges in future also, but in different forms adapting to different strategies of teaching.

While theory takes major teaching hours these days, future will be based on project works and practical knowledge which will kindle thinking process.”

The blended solution

It is obvious that while virtual classrooms are emerging as the new learning platform, traditional classrooms have no substitute.

As Prof. Koteswara Rao Anne, V.R.S. Engineering College, Vijayawada highlights, “Learning systems will only help in better understanding class room learning. It will only fill the vacuum that class room teaching is unable to fill.”

Therefore, the trend is towards harmoniously combining the strengths and benefits of both approaches in a blended solution.

As Mr. Ashokan Pichai continues, “Traditional classroom methods are still very relevant but new learning techniques can be adapted and brought forth to the classroom.

The future will see a rich combination of classroom and computer-based learning supplemented with rich educational teaching aids. E-learning will inevitably continue to rise in popularity, but they will never completely replace traditional learning methods but instead they will just augment their use!”

The classroom remains intact, but there is greater reliance on technology with personal interactions being structured around computer aids and online resources. These valuable adjuncts can be in the form of discussion threads, course websites, learning management systems, laptop programs or even classroom time being reduced in favour of online classes.

There are different approaches for blending the varied components and pedagogical strategies depending on the needs of the course, learning objectives, student/teacher level, budget, etc. Now instructors have to transform into facilitators/guides using both technology and face-to-face teaching to develop independent learners.

Coming to the future, Mr. Amol Arora, Vice Chairman and MD, Shemrock and Shemford Schools, India envisages, “Schools of the future may become institutions where students come to socialise, for value inculcation, supplement social structures, physical development and access to tools which may not be available at home.

Similarly, teachers will be important for the emotional connect they bring to learning but the role of teachers is changing from an information disseminator to a facilitator who helps students make sense of the information explosion around them.” Yet, the new challenge for schools and teachers is to constantly innovate and keep pace with the technology or risk becoming irrelevant.

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