WHAT MAKES ONLINE LEARNING A SUCCESS:
PROFILING SUCCESSFUL ONLINE LEARNERS

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The concept of ‘Just-in-Time’ Learning explores certain skills or strategies to ensure successful online learning. Is effective online learning possible anywhere and at anytime? There are certain pre-requisites which should be available, in terms of necessary hardware, software and human support. But is that all that is needed? Can there be other factors in terms of skills and strategies, which if an online learner possesses and adopts, may ensure better chances of success? Can such strategies and skills be introduced to the learners to promote better success?

This paper discusses such skills which an online or a distance learning student may possess as well as different cognitive/meta-cognitive learning strategies, and sources of motivation in relation to online computer programmes offered by Indira Gandhi National Open University. These programmes are Bachelor’s of Information Technology and Advanced Diploma in Information Technology. The purpose of this paper is to profile successful online learners studying these programmes. Specifically, this paper provides a comprehensive look at the various skills, cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies, motivational factors, and the stages of concern of online learners for accepting this new paradigm of learning.

Introduction

With the new advances in Web Technologies, greater access to internet in the educational institutions, many universities all over the globe are offering courses and degree programmes online. There are universities which find it easier to run the show by being online and are delivering also in the same mode. The internet technology has offered realistic resources to triumph over the limitation of distance and time and there is an increased interest in applying flexibility learning for all students, no matter what, how, when or where they study (Herrmann et al, 2000).

The job of developing and teaching courses online provides a motivating challenge. The Universities are adopting new technologies to meeting increasing demands of education. Conventional media such as print, telephone, audio and video are still popular in open and distance learning setting. However, the explosive growth of the web and the dynamic potential of online teaching and learning are stimulating the universities to find new ways to engage students in learning process and to find new cohorts of students wanting to study online (DeLong, 1997). Online technologies are the latest technology application in higher education that has emerged during the recent few years. Due to rapidly increase of private organization in the field of online learning, the system is taking the shape more of business than a social activity. Unless teachers acquire the mind set and competencies to be leader in learning business, the prospects could not be encouraging. A likely scenario in future for academics is a learning manager who aims not to be the best in the world but one who knows how and where to go in the world access to the best through online technologies (Elson-Green, 1999).

Anywhere-Anytime Education

Starr (1998) reported an increase in the demand for online institutional delivery as virtual learning communities are being created to increase access to a broader assortment of educational opportunities for learners. Those who found the new technologies as improving efficiencies to the prevailing teaching and learning practices are now asserting that existing practices are being presented in new dimensions by the new technology adoption (Idhe, 1982). But, the manner in which the new technology does this, all aspects of how and why of the teaching and learning, has effected bigger change. The consequence is not the same education environment plus the new technologies, but all things change to accommodate the new technologies (Arnold, 1999). The institutions endeavor to put together higher educational opportunities to the masses through the click of a mouse anywhere-
anytime. Learning resources are unique activities, electronic rooms or spaces, and tools that support interactive learning and ample learner control of environment and events. Every resource contains its own unique set of requirements and considerations which should be viewed as interrelated and connected to other types of resources.

**Successful Online Learning**

There have been good researches on effectiveness of learning through distance education mode and traditional mode, this paper discusses what happens for online learning. What makes it a successful online learning? Can we learn effectively through online medium by being anywhere and at anytime? Certainly there are certain pre-requisite things to be available, in terms of necessary hardware, software and human support, but is it all that we need? Can there be other factors in terms of skills and strategies, which if a online learner possess and adopts, may make him/her better than others? Can such strategies and skills be introduced to the learners to promote better success? This paper discusses such skills which an online or a distance learning student may possess different cognitive/meta-cognitive learning strategies, and sources of motivation.

Critical to the successful use of online learning would be the creation of new organisational structures or ‘electronic institutions’. The most important tasks of an educational institution built to meet the learning needs of the new millennium would be (Bates, 1999):

- To provide information on education, training needs and opportunities.
- To provide quality control.
- To provide accreditation through independent assessment of learning.
- To develop cohort curricula wherever appropriate.
- To enable teachers and learners to use communication and technologies to import and export multimedia learning materials.
- To network learners and teachers.
- To create high quality educational multimedia materials in an easily accessible form.
- To conduct research into education and training needs.
- To apply new technologies as they develop, to education and training and to evaluate their use.

**Roles and responsibilities of learners**

As the roles and responsibilities of the instructors are changing based on online settings, those associated with learners change as well. The instructor/faculty is accountable for conceptualisation and institution of online course structure. Yet the learner is accountable for generating sense through the information resources provided and instructional events planned (Land and Hannafin, 1996).

**Web-based discussion forums**

According to Berge and Collins (1993) the main benefits of web-based discussion forums were the convenience for students, the time and place independence that it produced for students, and the possibility for students to become part of an online learning community.

**Students’ use of e-mail**

Slovacek (1989) reported that

“there appeared to [be] a positive correlation between students’ use of e-mail to augment normal in-class communication with their instructors and final course grades [specifically] that each e-mail message initiated by the students was associated with a 1.781 point increase in final course grade on average” (pp. 113-114).
Writing by students

Ambron (1987) reported a favourable effect on student performance when they undertake careful and deliberate writing:

“student response [was] extremely favourable; … most mentioned the value of writing in helping them understand [the subject.]” (p. 266).

Moore (1993) reported that “learning improves … when writing assignments are complemented with instruction about how to use writing as a tool to learn [a subject.]” (p. 217).

The above was also supported by Chickering and Gamson (1987) who revealed that one of the seven principles for good undergraduate education was that learners “must talk about what they are learning [and] write about it” (p. 5).

Interaction

Chickering and Gamson (1987) also expressed that interaction between students and the faculty and between students and other students is a main factor in promoting learning.

Moore (1994), also hold the same opinion:

“asking students to write is an effective way of making students think because writing involves more than putting down what’s already in your head. Rather, writing is a powerful tool for learning because it helps you discover, develop, and organise your ideas” (p. 290).

Conclusions

As online instruction delivery system moves forward, further wide-ranging resources and structures are required to support high quality learning and communication processes. The online learning environments are being designed to provide comprehensive support for the process of learning and instruction (Dringus, 1999). Positive motivational content, clear goals and expectations, meaningful learner activities and interaction with others are features of learning environments that encourage profound approaches of learning (Gibbs, 1992). Development of relevant skills among the online learners is of prime importance to make online learning a successful endeavour.

References

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