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Tech-Enabled Learner Support Services in ODL: New Dynamics and Key Challenges

Education

KEYWORDS: Technology; Learner Support Services; Open and Distance Learning.

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ABSTRACT

This write up explores the learner support services offered to the open and distance learners and also discusses about the new dynamics and key challenges. To meet the students' need successfully, support is needed at every stage. Bridging the face to face instructional gap between instructors and learners, appropriate information and communication technology is used. A learner support service is one of the key components of ODL system that is being extended to the learners for maximizing the learning outcomes even at a distance. In this cyber age, the vision of linking learners and instructors who are physically separated and are at a distance, comes true through ICT. It has changed the way of traditional educational transaction. Education is reaching to the doorsteps of the learners through computer-mediated communication and web-based teaching and learning. Open and distance learning system offers courses directly to students using distance education technologies which are commonly divided into two modes of delivery: synchronous and asynchronous. Thus, the new ICT has become an important vehicle for educational transaction, day to day communication and transmission of knowledge, sharing of information and enhancement of skills. The paper, however, concludes that learner supports services in ODL system needs to be strengthened and new technologies, applications and other appliances should be widely utilized for varied institutional purposes as and when required.

Background

Education is a fundamental right to provide equal opportunity to all people irrespective of caste, creed, culture, religion, region, gender etc. in a democratic country. Providing education to all people is not possible only through the formal system of education as people have lots of constraints to get educated by formal traditional education system. In this scenario, ODL system is the only alternative for providing equal educational opportunity. A number of other terms (distributed learning, e-learning, online learning, etc.) are used roughly synonymously with distance education (Wikipedia, 2017, p.01).

In the context of education for all, formal mode of education is not sufficient as it reaches only to those aspirants who have time to attend the classes regularly and timely. In contrast, ODL is a kind of educational system which reaches to the doorsteps of the needy learners. It uses not only print-based support but also wide spectrum of technological support as well as communicational media and their ilk to connect the clienteles and instructors for instruction to overcome their difficulties and resolve their problems in order to realize the independent learning. Technology also allows for the repurposing of pre-existing educational materials across media formats: print static illustration, still and digital photographs, digital audio, still and motion video, still and motion films, animations, computer graphics, and hypermedia can all be accessed and combined in novel ways (Ravichandran R & Sasikala, P. 2006, p.44).

Open and Distance Learning

In ODL system, the nature of learning is different from those governing the traditional system of education. It promotes self-paced learning and individual learning. ODL refers to a system of teaching and learning characterized by separation of teacher and learner in time and/or place; uses multiple media for delivery of instruction; involves two-way communication and occasional face to face to meeting for tutorials and learner-learner interaction (Commonwealth of Learning, 2015, p.4). Being separated physically and geographically from teachers and learners, resources are needed for instruction, accessing information and educational transaction. In India, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has expressed a need for modes of education that can cater to the increasing demand for higher education in the country (Bhattacharya, B. 2012, p. 01).

The nature of students is also different from formal students. Students have different learning styles. To meet the students' need successfully, support is needed at every stage. Bridging the face to face instructional gap between instructors and learners, appropriate information and communication technology is used.

In today's fast forward knowledge-based global world, science and technology has become the part and parcel of our day to day life as life tends to happen on the go. ICT plays a crucial role in knowledge explosion. It is a diverse set of technological gadgets for creating sharing, disseminating, communicating, storing, manipulating, managing and gathering information and knowledge at wider public space. In this cyber age, the vision of linking learners and instructors who are physically separated and are at a distance, comes true through ICT. It has changed the way of traditional educational transaction. Education is reaching to the doorsteps of the learners through computer-mediated communication and web-based teaching and learning. Thus, the new ICT has become an important vehicle for educational transaction, day to day communication and transmission of knowledge, sharing of information and enhancement of skills.

Tech-Enabled Learner Support Services in ODL

Learner support services are the range of activities which facilitate and enhance learners' learning. To make educational transaction more effective, tech-enabled learner support services are the need of the hour. It is a kind of support services which promotes instructional delivery in a flexibly newer way. Learners have much more control over permanent technologies such as both cassettes and computers than over ephemeral technologies such as lectures or broadcasts (Dorothy, J.S. 2016, p.17).

Open and distance learning system offers courses directly to students using distance education technologies which are commonly divided into two modes of delivery: synchronous and asynchronous. In ODL system, synchronous learning is a kind of instructional delivery mode where participants' presence is needed at the same time. Synchronous learning takes place through Web conferencing, video conferencing, direct broadcast satellite, live streaming, educational and instructional television, internet, radio, telephone calls, chatting, multimedia technologies etc. Asynchronous learning takes place where participants' presence is not needed at the same time. They can access information and course material whenever and wherever they want. CD, DVD, email, online print material, voice mail, fax, message board forum etc, are the example of asynchronous modes of delivering the instruction.

Possible Benefits of Tech-Enabled Learner Support services

In the context of suitable learner support services, if provided systematically and practically, outcomes of educational objectives can be achieved and clienteles' performance can be improved. Following are the possible benefits of tech-enabled learner support services:

- Studies support that tech-enabled learner support has greater advantages in terms of accessing information, performance, facilitating and enhancing learning, eradicating communi cational gap, active participation, teachers' professional development etc.
- Tech-enabled learner support services offer need-based instruction to mass aspirants. Information and communication technology is inevitable to speed up the delivery of learner support services.
- The interactive multimedia content in ODL makes a feasible option for learners to learn whenever they want, at their own pace and time.
- Tech-enabled learner support services promote instructional delivery in a flexibly newer way while allowing ODL to impart education in a cost effective manner.
- Web-conferencing, satellite broadcasting, educational television, interactive radio counseling etc. enable the learners to learn and share their learning experience with others too.
- A key advantage of tech-enabled learner support services is that education reaches to the doorsteps of needy learners residing in a remote area. Through telecommunication and audio-video broadcasting, knowledge and information can be transmitted across the geographical distance.
- It has greater impact on disadvantaged group of learners, women and person with disabilities.
- In the context of using audio-video conferencing, ODL breaks the linguistic isolation of learners by allowing them to communicate in their own language(s).
- E-mail and other networking sites as well as communicational media, help in breaking the isolation and reducing the time of delivery in ODL.
- Through motion pictures, video streaming, animation, graphics etc., teaching-learning process can be enriched.
- Through teleconferencing and interactive radio phone-in programme, learners reduce their difficulties and resolve their problems on their own for the successful completion of their course. Some of the more interactive technologies such as audio conferencing and computer conferencing do allow for a quick development of a course and continuous updating (Dorothy, J.S. 2016, p.17).
- Through internet and other websites, learners get greater opportunity to access information, knowledge and skills needed in 21st century.

New Dynamics in ODL

History reports us that correspondence education was started with Issac Pitman's Shorthand courses for the education of distance learners using technology i.e. Penny Post. Correspondence education relies mainly on printed material delivered to the learners by the postal system. In distance education, all the possible means of communication are used to educate the mass aspirants. Now it is a time when open and distance learning system has emerged to transfer class education into mass education by using multimedia and emerging information and communication technology. Digital media and Internet communication transform teaching and learning practices (Denning 1996). It is more techno-savvy in nature. ODL system in the 21st century has witnessed a paradigm shifts from:

- Classroom to anywhere, anytime learning,
- Teacher –centric to learner-centric learning,
- Teacher as instructor to teacher as facilitator,
- Mainly oral instruction to technology-enabled varied educational provision,
- You learn what we offer' to 'we offer what you want to learn',
- Education as a one-time activity to a life-long activity etc.

By using the advanced tech-enabled learner support services, the nature of learning and practices of education in ODL has changed, thereby generating new dynamics in ODL system such as:

- Blended learning is an emerging concept in the business of educational transactions. ODL system gives an opportunity for blended learning in which learners learn by attending a class delivered by instructor in a classroom as well as using digital or online learning experiences such as video recorded lectures, web conferencing, satellite broadcasting, live video and text chats, computer-mediated activities and other tech-enabled learning strategies. Graham in his book Handbook of Blended Learning, has defined the 'blended learning system as learning system that "combine face to face instruction with computer mediated instruction". Thus, ODL system is a kind of system which paves the way for interactive learning by transmitting knowledge and information across the globe, leading a change in the process of education to educate mass aspirants with the help of internet and digital media.
- Distributed learning has an important role to play in the field of education. Distributed learning is a type of learning system in which learners are separated geographically from the instructor but keeps in touch with the teacher from tech-enabled learning facilities. In ODL system, distributed learning is executed in a variety of ways such as learner-to-learner and instructor-to-learner interaction.
- Collaborative learning has its own significant in the pursuit of learning, knowledge and education. In ODL system, there is a scope for collaborative learning in which learners attempt to learn together as it promotes individual as well as group learning increasing learning outcomes. Collaborative learning can be enhanced using Tutored Video Instruction in which a group of learners, after watching the recorded video lectures, discuss the material amongst themselves by stopping the lectures in between. It is very beneficial for distance learners as it promotes self-paced learning.
- Synchronous learning is one of the distinguished features of today's ODL system. In ODL system, synchronous learning is a kind of instructional delivery mode where participants' presence is needed at the same time. Synchronous learning takes place through Web conferencing, video conferencing, direct broadcast satellite, live streaming, educational and instructional television, internet, radio, telephone calls, chatting, multimedia technologies etc.
- Asynchronous learning is an important feature of new age technology enabled learning environment. Asynchronous learning takes place where participants' presence is not needed at the same time. They can access information and course material whenever and wherever they want. CD, DVD, email, online print material, voice mail, fax, message board forum etc, are the example of asynchronous modes of delivering the instruction.
- Hybrid learning is also one of the new dynamics of technology integrated learning infrastructure. Hybrid learning is a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous learning in which criss-cross communication takes place. Learners can learn via face to face classroom methods combined with computer-mediated instruction on their own.

Key Challenges

It is a fact that nothing could be achieved without facing some relevant challenges in implementing any practices. In the same way, some significant challenges are to be addressed in order to ensure quality learner support mechanism. A few of the key challenges requiring to be implemented in a cost-effective manner, are listed below:

- Lack of access in hardware, software and technological services,
- Lack of trained and competent faculty to deliver the support services effectively,
- Lack of multimedia production centre to produce the tech-enabled learners support services,
- Lack of communication gadgets to entertain the learners and instructors;

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- Inadequate funding,
- Lack of tech-enabled learning environment,
- Lack of instructional material delivery at proper time,
- Lack of commitment in support services providers etc.

Thus, policy makers, planners, educators, educational administrators and other stakeholders, need to ponder over the key challenges for the feasible implementation and easier access of tech-enabled learners support services in ODL system.

Conclusion

ODL system, therefore, emerged out of the achieving goal of universalization of education. In this cyber age, the vision of linking learners and instructors who are physically separated and are at a distance, comes true through ICT. It has changed the way of traditional educational transaction. Education is reaching to the doorsteps of the learners through computer-mediated communication and web-based teaching and learning. Thus, the new ICT has become an important vehicle for educational transaction, day to day communication and transmission of knowledge, sharing of information and enhancement of skills. To meet the students' need successfully, support is needed at every stage. Bridging the face to face instructional gap between instructors and learners, appropriate information and communication technology is used. It is an alternative system of education to reach the increasingly mass aspirants to access the courses and programmes, from anywhere, at their own pace and time. Since physical absence of learners is one of the attributes of ODL system, this gap is filled through communication using latest emerging technologies.

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