

# **ADVENT OF E-LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION, AND ITS CHALLENGES**

**Dr. (Mrs.) Meeta Shukla\***

## **ABSTRACT**

Learning lies at the heart of modern society. Over the past decade, e-learning has emerged as a key source of expansion and competition in education. Proper uses of new media like the internet, contribute to learning becoming vastly more decentred as well as all-embracing in contrast with what went before. Teaching and learning can now happen at any time and in any place. The once separate phases of an education taking place early on in life and a subsequent 'career' have become blurred. The separating out of classrooms and lecture halls from other physical settings as the primary places of learning has also come to an end.

As the scope of information and communication technology (ICT) rapidly increases and expands, its benefits are creating reliance in higher education upon related e-learning technologies. In other words, with the advent of cyber technology, the current scenario in the education sector of developing countries is also experiencing the beginning of participation in the exploration and exploitation of e-learning initiatives. The construction of the European Space for Higher Education (ESHF) is confronting universities with a set of fundamental challenges. According to R. Erichsen (1998) "we are living in time in which global views, actions information and communication technology (ICT) are dominating and demanding every effort of institutions of higher education - though locally based- to stay or become able to compete in a world wide scenario."

This new situation is being seen by some countries as a great opportunity to rethink teaching in terms of student's learning. Introducing this fundamental change involves big methodological challenges for higher education teachers. One of this changes being the increasing use of e-learning due to its potential for an autonomous and collaborative knowledge construction. The dawn of e-learning in higher education has entailed extensive use of online discussion boards to promote collaborative learning among students. Increasing use of e-learning means that online discussions are often the glue that binds a group of students together to become a collaborative learning community.

E-learning is not just an alternative way of delivering information as a resource for learning. Its use by teachers and learners gives rise to a variety of new interactional situations which all have their own particular properties. Some courses using e-learning are predominantly face-to-face with some online interaction; some are blended with online interaction supplemented by face-to-face interaction in a more equal balance, while others take place almost wholly online. E-learning may

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\* Head, Deptt. of English, D. A. V. (Post-Graduate) College, Dehradun (UK).

involve participants working in groups or independently, both with or without supervision. E-learning also takes place in a wide range of learning domains: K-12 education, higher and further education, corporate training, lifelong learning, and informal learning. Due to the opportunities created by e-learning, many people are now attracted to training and education who would not have before considered it possible or even relevant to their lives.

However, there are certain challenges that have cropped up as far as learning with technology is concerned. This paper attempts to address some of these challenges.

Although different studies have pointed out a set of important issues regarding the use of e-learning systems such as the considerable time, effort and skills needed to implement the full potential of technology; the lack of motivation of e-learning tutors and lack of time for tutoring students; the implementation of inadequate methodologies for the new format: the lack of good and adequate teaching materials, being, too often digitalised versions of those used in face-to-face teaching; little participation opportunities for students; technical difficulties. The challenges facing e-learning in developing countries are ongoing and require everyone's attention.

Thus, providing sufficient and timely support to online learners and instructors has always been a challenge for higher education institution, and current trends suggest that it will become even more difficult. The key reason for this is the rapid growth of e-learning use. Global learning and cultural exchange via e-learning can unite and contribute to coexistence and world peace.

Over the last three decades, one has witnessed dramatic changes in higher education teaching aids. E-learning has evolved from the traditional face-to-face (F2F) method, enhancing the distant teaching and learning concept. Traditional teaching aids such as blackboards are gradually being replaced by technology-intensive aids, such as digital presentation displays, smart boards, etc. Teaching-support applications, such as bulletin-boards, content management and integrated communication tools, as well as web-based learning content management systems, address a broad range of needs of educational institutions, allowing for set up and maintenance of central learning hubs. Synchronous and asynchronous e-e-learning are the two major approaches currently used for distance learning. Synchronous e-learning sessions take place in a virtual classroom, assisted by various technological and communication aids. The teacher and the students take part in a class and interact throughout the session. Asynchronous e-learning abolishes the time and place boundaries, by providing students with online course materials and asynchronous communication aids, such as web forums and digital bulletin-boards. Both synchronous and asynchronous methods require teachers to acquire new capabilities and skills, in addition to the traditional ones.

Asynchronous methods essentially break the teacher-student online communication, thereby significantly affecting the learning experience. In order to compensate for this need, intensive technology is used, allowing students an easier access to the course materials, exercises, essay guidelines, etc. Content management applications and rich hyperlinked documents enhance the learning experience, and provide students with easy access to websites, articles, rich multimedia, and presentation materials.

Teachers may choose more than one method and create hybrid classes: for example, traditional F2F teaching, accompanied by a "virtual class", utilizing the beneficial advantages of technology, without renouncing the advantages of frontal teaching in class.

Teaching and learning experience may be enriched by leveraging content delivery using advanced technology. Dedicated applications, such as Learning Content Management System (LCMS), provide a comprehensive set of solutions for managing and delivering course materials as well as forms of communication. Course materials are enriched by adding multimedia, virtual worlds, simulation tools and simulators, either in class or anywhere else. Highly intensive usage of technology is environmentally-independent, and thus maybe used for traditional frontal teaching in class, as well as in distant learning methodologies. Being exposed to the LCMS's benefits, students' demands increase, thus empowering the usage rate and gradually turning the LCMS into an essential element of the academic teaching and learning experience.

The promotion of learning through online discussion groups requires skilled facilitation by educators who are able to recognize when and how to respond to expressions of student need and how to shape, promote, and respond to group interaction. Successful facilitators combine critical judgments about the content of contributions with clear decisions about the intervention process. The complexity of this process means that facilitators need to exercise skills of self-awareness in relation to how they make decisions with regard to student learning.

The role of instructors as online facilitators is typically ill-defined due to a lack of sufficient standards or guidelines for good practice; as such facilitators often fail to provide appropriate guidance, beneficial support, or productive intervention to students engaged in course-related assignments and activities.

To meet these challenges, it is necessary to develop new models to enhance e-learning practice that can be easily adapted to suit different pedagogical styles and academic settings. This can be done by providing concrete examples of appropriate intervention strategies in different situations ranging from more generalized forms of support or encouragement to specific prompts to elicit further debate, critique, and reflection regarding specific course-related issues.

In a world in which learning has become a chronic and necessary feature for getting on with our lives, we have to deal with these challenges in an active and generative way in order to deliver tangible results towards making e-learning work.

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