

CRITICAL LOOK AT ONLINE LEARNING AND MOOCS IN THE OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING SCENARIO

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ABSTRACT

Technology-led education is being widely discussed as the next big thing that could completely transform student learning. Online courses and Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) are increasing. There are increasing discussions about including MOOCs in distance education curriculums. This paper takes a critical look at online courses and MOOCs and their feasibility in open and distance learning scenario.

KEYWORDS: *Online Learning, MOOCS, Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Issues in MOOCs*

Article History

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INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of technology in learning has steadily been gaining traction over the past couple of decades. In the last few years, the accessibility of technology has increased in an unprecedented manner. With this, education has also seen an increase in usage of technology to deliver lessons to students. This opened up an interesting avenue for open and distance learning. Open and distance learning students do not follow the same learning structure and do not have the same contact with educators and peers as regular learners. All these factors make a good case for using technology to bring learners and educators of open and distance learning together using technology. MOOCs are becoming increasingly popular and are being sought to be introduced in distance education as electives in CBCS courses for certification. In this scenario, it is important to evaluate what the impact of integrating MOOCs in distance and open learning is and the issues that may arise in the future by such integration.

OBJECTIVE

The Objective of this Paper is to

- Examine the issues of online courses and MOOCs
- Evaluate the feasibility of online courses and MOOCs in open and distance learning

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data for this paper has been collected from primary and secondary sources. Primary data includes first-hand survey of a random sample of students of size 94. Secondary data includes data collected from magazines and websites.

The Characteristics of Open / Distance Learner

Distance / Open learning do not follow the same structure as regular learning. The learners of distance / open learning also differ in their characteristics from regular learners. A few of the characteristics of open and distance learners are discussed below:

- **Loss of Learning Habit and Routine:** Distance learners do not have a set schedule every day for learning and studying. Distance learning accommodates learners who cannot continue their education full-time. Thus, learning in the case of distance learners is sporadic and inconsistent as they lack a routine. This results in a lack of regular learning habit.
- **Fatigue with Daily Chores:** Most distance learners choose the option of open learning as they are engaged in other full-time activities such as jobs, home-making, etc. Thus, learning for them only happens when they have free time from such chores. As they are engaged in such chores for most of the day, they might be fatigued at the end of the day and may not be able to focus on education like other regular learners.
- **Low Confidence Levels:** Confidence in students increases when they are regularly interacting with their teachers and their peers and when they regularly test their knowledge and skills. Education in schools and colleges provides avenues for students to gain such confidence. But, due to the limited time spent by distance learners in such conventional classroom settings, their confidence levels take a hit.
- **Require Preparation for Getting Adjusted to Learning:** As discussed before, most learners opting for distance and open learning are the ones that come back to education after taking a break from education and are no longer able to afford time to pursue regular education. Due to this, most of them lose touch with the learning process. These students require some time and preparation to adjust to learning and education.
- **Should be Taught the Ability to Learn:** Most of the learning in distance education is individual learning. Even with the aid of the educational institutions such as classes and broadcasts, it is undeniable that the onus of education in distance learning falls mostly on the students themselves. Thus, in distance learning there should be an emphasis on teaching students how to learn rather than only on the subject matter. This helps the students in the long run and also ensures that the learning is continuous and does not end with the completion of exams.

Distance Learning and MOOCs: The Current Scenario

Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) are currently being hyped the next big thing in distance education. They are essentially online courses that students can enrol in and complete from the comfort of their own homes. Most universities have started offering MOOCs and they have been well received by students. Increasingly MOOCs are being sought to be introduced in distance education as electives in CBCS courses for certification. In such scenario where MOOCs are being hyped as being a new avenue to deliver distance education, it is necessary to examine the issues that may arise from such technology driven distance learning.

Issues and Problems in MOOCs

- **Overhyped:** According to many researchers, MOOCs is massively overhyped. Even though there are hundreds of courses available and most reputable universities offer MOOCs, the impact of MOOCs on students, compared to the hype it receives is much less. In fact, after initial hype, the popularity of most MOOCs courses is fading. It has also been reported that even though most students who signed up for MOOCs are professionals, it has not translated to a better skilled workforce and thus the impact of MOOCs does not measure up to its reputation.
- **Drop-Out Rates and Low Re-Enrolment:** The dropout rates for MOOCs courses are high. According to the report in quartz magazine, average enrolment for MOOCs courses is around 30,000 to 50,000 students. But the problem is that more than 90% of those learners do not finish their course. Students rarely return to finish their courses. Many don't even start the courses that they enrol for. Students who finish their courses do not enrol for another course. So, the value that these MOOCs are providing is still lower than what the PR for it suggests.
- **Losing Skills Due to Dependence on Technology:** Research suggests that dependence on technology has an adverse effect on student's brain. It is also important to note that researchers think that reading on a screen and reading a book are not the same. When reading a book, we do "deep reading". The dependence on screens is reducing the ability of students to do deep reading. Thus, complete dependence on technology for education is not a very effective approach.
- **Uneven Impact on Students:** Traditional classroom approaches provide the educators opportunities to evaluate a student's capabilities and adjust their teaching according to the student. But MOOCs do not do that. It has been reported that MOOCs are actually hurting low-performing students, the ones that they are supposed to help. Thus, the impact of online learning varies depending on the students and not all the students are affected in the same way.

Issues Faced by Students

The issues faced by students in navigating online courses and MOOCs are discussed briefly below.

- **Issues Based on Course Logistics:** Not all MOOCs courses are easy to navigate. Some are not easy to understand and complete. Lack of help in such courses can be very frustrating. Some courses also have strict time limits which may be difficult for some students to adhere to. Proper planning of MOOCs courses is also important. It is difficult to navigate and complete courses that have been poorly planned.
- **Lack of Technological Infrastructure:** One important thing that is often less discussed when talking about technology blended learning in the context of India is the availability of resources. There are still places in the country that do not have the required technological infrastructure to have seamless access to internet and technology. In such cases, complete dependence on technology aided learning would be disadvantageous to certain sections of society.
- **Lack of Interaction:** Most MOOCs do not have the same level of interaction as real-world classrooms. It is a known fact that for learning to be efficient, student-teacher and student-student interaction is vital. Currently, online learning cannot provide this to the students as classrooms do.

- **Time and Cost Requirements:** Online learning is mostly individualistic and as discussed, it is not heavily aided by other stakeholders such as teachers and peers. This means that the amount of time that is spent by students to learn and go through learning material is more than what regular learning requires. Even though, MOOCs are mostly free courses, some online courses are paid courses and are costly.
- **Self-Regulation Required:** Students who want to excel in online courses must ensure that they are disciplined, have good study habits and are good at managing their time. The possibility of poor behaviour such as skipping course content, plagiarism and cheating is also high. Thus, to get the best results, students must be self-regulating.

Practical Reality at Study Centres

To understand the practicality and feasibility of technology dependent learning in the open and distance learning scenario, a survey has been done on students of the regional study centre of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University in Mahaboobnagar. The students were asked questions about access to computers, smart phones and their interest in online learning. The results of the same are as follows:

Tables show It can clearly be seen from these results that even though MOOCs and online learning are extremely hyped up, the ground reality is not exactly conducive for technology-led education. Many students do not have access to technology and even if they do, the majority do not seem interested in online learning when compared to regular learning. It is difficult to ensure good education in ODL systems when the students are not motivated enough to pursue it.

Students with Access to Computers

Table 1: Students with Access to Computers

Category = Computers	Total No. of Students	Students with Computer Access	Students without Computer Access
Number of students	94	13	81
Percentage		13.8	86.2

Students with Access to Smart Phones

Table 2: Students with Access to Smart Phones

Category = Smart Phones	Total No. of Students	Students with Smart Phones	Students without Smart Phones
Number of students	94	67	27
Percentage		71.3	28.7

Student's Interest in Online Learning

Table 3: Student's Interest in Online Learning

Category	Total No. of Students	Interested in Online Learning	Not Interested in Online Learning	Non-Committal
No. of students	94	23	52	19
Percentage		24.5	55.3	20.2

CONCLUSIONS

Technological aids in education, though popular and seem interesting are only successful when both the student and the teacher are motivated enough about the subject matter. It is thus important to go back to the basics and increase the passion for education in students which can only be done by truly passionate teachers. Education essentially is about people. Teachers provide insights, experiences and wisdom and any amount of technology cannot match up to that experience of

being in the classroom with the teacher. Thus, technology can be used only as a supplementary resource, that too, if it is feasible.

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