Chapter 12

The Reality of Use of WhatsApp as a Tool for Distance Education in Teaching and Learning: The Case of the Faculty Members at the Department of Information Studies at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to investigate the reality of WhatsApp use among faculty members at the Department of Information Studies (IS) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in the Sultanate of Oman as a tool for distance education (DE) and as a tool for teaching and learning. The study also focuses on the information retrieved on WhatsApp teaching groups and its use. Data was collected through the interview method. The results of the study showed that three faculty members out of nine are using WhatsApp in teaching and learning. They use it for class discussions and explanations of projects. The study showed that the three faculty members in the Department of IS who used WhatsApp in teaching and learning are using it in general to communicate with the students and also for educational purpose. In addition, the study showed a relationship between age, nationality, and specialization. The study also proved that students used WhatsApp as an open source of information.

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INTRODUCTION

In the past, faculty members were information controller and they were feeding that information to the students. Those faculty members depended a lot on printed materials. As a result, faculty members and printed materials were the only sources of information. To obtain information from those resources, students attended classes, and these classes were conducted face to face and if a student missed a class, he or she would not be able to get the contents. However, the use of technology is to facilitate learning process. Because of technology the role of faculty members has changed too. According to Roubides (2015) as educational institutions have started developing or adopting eLearning programs in the past decade, the role of faculty in this new environment had to be redesigned, redeveloped or re-invented in order to make faculty’s contribution to student learning to be as effective as in the traditional face-to-face environment.

To redesign the role of the faculty members the technology has to use facilities in the teaching and learning process as well as the faculty members have to be facilitators rather than spoon-feeding the students. In addition, the education should be delivered to everyone on the time that suits her/him and to the location that will be easier for him or her to reach. To deliver the education for the learner on their time and at their locations, institutions have to depend on distance education (DE). Actually, DE plays a vital role in facilitating teaching and learning process; it opens the door to everyone to achieve the principles of equal opportunities. According to Davidian (2010) DE is the way of delivering education by any means other than the traditional method of classroom lecture and activities, in which a lecturer is regularly and constantly present and includes correspondence by e-mail television, videotape, interactive CD, live and interactive video conferencing, Internet and or web based instruction. In fact, the use of DE can solve the problem for learners’ locations, especially if those learners live in districts far away from the educational institutions. As Kantek (2014), believes DE is the method of extending learning, or delivering instructional resource-sharing opportunities, to locations away from the classroom, building or site by using video, audio, computers, multimedia communications, or some combination of these with other traditional delivery methods. In fact, the use of DE will be very helpful for housewives who have a wish to continue their study but their circumstance as a mother might prevent them. This is in agreement to what Billings, (2007), Hyde & Murray (2005) think that at present, instructors use DE for delivering entire courses and/or educational programs worldwide, or for providing specific learning experiences for academic courses, staff development, or continuing education.

According to Zhang & Cui (2010) the elements of DE include separation of instructor and learner in space and occasionally also in time. It also involves the use of educational media to link instructor and learner and carry course content provision of two-way communication between instructor and learner, and volitional control of learning by students rather than by the instructor. In fact, the success and spread of DE depends on the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT), which refers to technologies that provide access to information through telecommunications (http://www.techterms.com/definition/ict). However, there is a clear difference between ICT and e-learning (electronic learning) according to Machine (2003) e-learning can be defined as all activities required for the delivery of effective teaching and learning through the use of ICT in its broadest sense. This includes Classroom delivery, online learning, tutorials and coaching, staff/student communications, planning, preparation and assessment. While Itmazi (2013) thinks e-learning is the use of new multimedia technologies and the internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration.
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