Chapter 17

Online Education:
Reflection on Communication
Skills of Distance Learners

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses and examines online learning in distance education (DE) context. It seeks to argue how learners cope with online education and become successful online learners. Further, while learning through the online mode how do communication skills assist them to prevent barriers in their learning activities? A critical reflection on communication skills of online learners is summarized and highlighted. The online learners’ reactions and responses are also mentioned in this chapter, documented in a few case studies available at different journals and Web portals. Further, the significance of blogging as a communication tool of online platform is elucidated with reference to learners’ engagement in social interaction and collaborative learning situations.

INTRODUCTION

With the advancement and upgradation in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) distance learning has shifted into another phase, which is quite exciting and enthralling for learners. Distance learners, in this situation, can continue their higher education by opting online learning and can do so from the comfort of their home. The expression ‘online learning’ is known by different titles include;

- E-Learning
- Web-based education
- Online education
Distance education institutions across the globe offer a large number of online courses on different subjects encompassing humanities, social sciences, business administration, engineering, medical sciences, and professional courses. In order to acquaint with and adapting themselves to online courses, learners need some abilities/characteristics include; self-motivation, time management skills, communication skills, and study skills. These skills assist learners to become familiar with the technological instructions designed for online courses and/or programmes. Thus, it is logically deducible that online learners are surrounded with three indubitable elements: technology, instructor, and curriculum.

The online environment offers unique challenges and opportunities for learners and instructors/tutors to establish successful online learning platforms. While instructors design the platform by keeping in mind the target group, their knowledge of technological usability and easy access to content, learners are also moving a step forward and try to do all sorts activities those asked by instructors to do on real time basis. But it is noticed that whatever flexible and convenient online education may be designed by the instructors, learners would take time to deal with an online course and/or programme. They may save communicating time in an online course but spend much of their time dealing with technology concerns (Alford & Lawson, 2009). However, distance learners find online learning as very convenient and flexible for their studies. This kind of learning, therefore, matches with their learning goals and busy lifestyle. Although online education allures many adult learners, but it is warranted with some challenges and problems when they deal with online courses. This is because of different instructional methods used in it and the prior requirement of communication skills involved in it.

### Responsible Factors for Online Learning

Learning online requires a different preparation than in a physical classroom situation. It requires good reading and writing skills because it is largely based on text and organizes through computer and Internet. Further, the ability to navigate the Internet and search information quickly on Web pages will also be necessary.

Self-motivation is also a crucial factor in online learning. Strong independent learning skills including good time management are equally essential. Also, studying by using the Internet requires a strong sense of avoiding ‘internet addiction’ or time wastage as users follow interesting links that do not advance the original inquiry (Reid, 1997). In this context a student said, “A Web page has many links because of which I have been misguided and used to click on interesting topics rather than focusing on the study contents consistently” (Roper, 2007).

New users of online learning environment may do well, if they restrict themselves to courses of short time frames in order to evaluate quickly their ability to succeed in learning online. Again, new users are also required to familiarize themselves with the culture of communication on the Internet (Ryder and Wilson, 1995). Through online communication, the physical separation between learners-learners, learners-instructors, learners-institution would no longer remain as an obstacle for learning.

According to Dabbagh (2007) the curricular for online course should have the following features.

1. Encourage learners to work in teams
2. Assist them to think critically and independently
3. Instruct them to aware of the focused clients
4. Give space to work in a flexible atmosphere

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**Online Education**