Teachers’ reflections on challenges facing performance-driven e-learning in Pakistan

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Abstract

This study investigated teachers’ reflective perspectives regarding challenges facing performance-driven e-learning in Pakistan. Twelve faculty members of Virtual University of Pakistan from Islamabad and Lahore Campus were interviewed and the texts were coded and analyzed qualitatively by employing Grounded Theory Approach (Creswell, 2003). From the analysis, four main categories were derived regarding challenges to performance driven e-learning: Hiring of qualified professors, guidance and financial support to enhance enrollment, excessive technology access, overcome communication hindrances between the instructor and student. Moreover, instructors’ perceptions revealed that e-learning should be facilitated in Pakistan, as it is an effective mode of learning in the context of a developing country where majority of virtual students are either working professionals or females of remote areas who cannot join traditional learning system for enhancing their capabilities.

Key words: e-learning, Virtual University, Grounded Theory Approach,
Introduction

Virtual mode of instruction has significantly affected changes both in the approaches teachers teach and the students learn. The role of the instructor changes, from authority figure to facilitator. The instructors face challenges that how to deal with the students in virtual climate despite of face-to-face contact.

In relation to virtual education Pakistan’s first public sector university that is based completely on modern information and communication technologies, is known as the Virtual University. It was in 2002 and now has established its campuses over sixty cities of the country with more than a hundred affiliated institutions providing infrastructure support to the students. It is a not-for-profit institution that provide an affordable quality education to aspiring students all over the country. It uses free-to-air satellite television broadcasts and the internet, that allows students to follow its rigorous programs regardless of their physical locations. Overseas Pakistani students are also enrolled in various universities’ programs. Being the only university that is completely associated with e-learning programs, the instructors of this university was selected for study purpose.

This mode of instruction has emerged as a relatively new alternative in education and training in this country. In this context, teachers’ perspectives were sought regarding challenges facing performance-driven e-learning in Pakistan.

Method

This study employed qualitative approach of research. For this purpose, twelve faculty members teaching different discipline of studies at Virtual University of Pakistan from Islamabad and Lahore Campus were interviewed and the texts were coded and analyzed with the help of Grounded Theory Approach (Creswell, 2003). Semi-structured interviews (based on interview guide) were conducted with sample students, in the months of February and March 2012. Interviews averaging approximately 25 to 30 minutes were recorded and also briefly noted and later transcribed in detail. The participants felt safe, comfortable, as “though what they were saying was valued” ((Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p.128). In qualitative research, there is greater probability to face ethical problems associated with interference upon confidentiality and with gaining informed consent from research participants. Ethical considerations of interviewing on issues related to official matters were therefore, imperative in relation to confidentiality.

Analysis

The analytic procedure was based on immersion in the data and repeated organization, coding,
and constant comparisons, which are the main features of grounded theory approach. “The core feature of qualitative data analysis is the coding process” (Creswell & Clark, 2007, p. 132). “Coding is a central part of a grounded theory approach and involves extracting meaning from nonnumeric data such as text” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p.349). It is a “process of grouping evidence and labeling ideas so that they reflect increasingly broader perspectives” (Creswell & Clark, 2007, p.132). The interviews taken for this study were transcribed verbatim. All the transcriptions were “regarded as ‘the truth’ and each transcription was considered to contain a one-to-one correspondence between what was said orally and the printed word” (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006, p.345). The qualitative data was analyzed by using grounded theory method. This process involved “generating categories of information (open coding) selecting one of the categories and positioning it within a theoretical model (axial coding), and then explicating a story from the interconnection of these categories (selective coding)” (Creswell, 2003, p.191). The researcher read these transcripts in their entirety in order to understand individual students’ experiences fully. Interviews were semi structured, and while the interviews had provided some opportunities for unstructured responses, the interview data was analyzed with the goal of characterizing teacher responses to a key set of interview items (see the exact interview items in the analysis section) related to the research questions. Thus, after reading all of the transcripts, the researcher focused on pinpointing variables across individual participants (students) that would allow her to better understand the perspectives regarding communication hindrance when using English as a medium of instruction. The themes emerged during the process of analysis, were supported with existing research studies in the relevant field. Thus the literature was used for “supplemental validation” for the accuracy of findings or how the findings differ from the published data (Creswell, 1998, p.209).

Findings

Several themes emerged from the interview transcription. These themes were then grouped together into larger perspectives that provide answer to the qualitative research question related to English medium of instruction as a communication hindrance between the instructor and student (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

From the analysis, four main categories were derived regarding challenges facing by the instructors of Virtual University of Pakistan in performance driven e-learning:

Hiring of Qualified Professors

In accordance with the instructors’ point of view, highly qualified faculty serves as a crucial component in the success of a university. They told that as the Virtual University is relatively a newly established institution, provision of qualified professors for their students is still seen as
a big challenge. Furthermore, students’ perceptions revealed that virtual lectures are recorded in advanced English by highly qualified professors (most are PhDs) who are not faculty members of virtual university, and feedback regarding those lectures is given by regular faculty members holding simple master’s degree. Informants were of the view that this phenomenon adds frustration among students and should be checked seriously. They further proposed that social presence of the instructors should also be ensured. Similar findings were revealed in a research study by Copley Cobb (2009) who concluded that “social presence remains a key influential component of the quality of the online learning experience from the student perspective, (p.251).

Guidance and Financial Support to enhance Enrollment

All participants were of the opinion that proper orientation at the time of admission regarding schedule of courses assignment and examination is an important component for success of online courses. At the same time provision of guidance services during the course and financial support for needy students is also very much crucial in this regard. Similarly, if instructors do not encourage their students and give proper feed back to them, then the students become desperate and if this continues, the possibility of their withdrawal from the system might be increased. Hart (2012) found in his literature review of previous studies regarding online programs that the main factors associated with student persistence in an online program include “satisfaction with online learning, a sense of belonging to the learning community, motivation, peer, and family support, time management skills, and increased communication with the instructor” (p.19).

Adequate Technology Access

First, the online teaching format poses challenges to teachers and students with respect to communication in a virtual environment, on the one hand. Second, on the other hand, the online forum was not viewed by the informants as a valid teaching and learning forum unless an appropriate technology access is provided and the proper training of students for usage of the technology is given. Similar to this study another research study by Gahungu, Dereshiwsky and Moan, (2006), the participants also recommended the “need for tutorials in the utilization of special teaching technology features” (p.130). In this study three respondents identified “the preparation to use some specific features of the online technology as an area of improvement”. (p.130). They further added that “features such as “chat-rooms,” “gradebook,” and media were still puzzling them” (p.131).

Overcome Communication Hindrances between the Instructor and Student

In accordance with the students’ point of view, English language is a major hindrance in frequent contact with instructors. They described that they belong to those students who do not
continue their studies with conventional education system due to either their job responsibilities or vice versa. They further added that they are not very much competent in English language and cannot use it effectively while communicating with their instructors through e-mail. They also complained that instructors do not show much interest in solving their problems. Paulus, et al. (2009) explained in their study that “before educators can create more learner-centered environments, they need to know more about their learners (p-13). Research evidence proved that an instructor can help students in creating a better learning environment. Bai, (2009) was of the view that “in attempt to promote students’ higher level of thinking in online discussion, instructor needs to let students’ know that they are expected to provide meaningful input and learn the characteristic of such input, (p-161). Informants were of the view that the role of instructors is very crucial in this regard. They should welcome their students’ e-mails and respond happily but in actual practice this does not happened. Consistent with the participants’ view, the findings of a research study by Sher (2009) also suggested that

The instructor must encourage students to actively participate in the course discussions; they must provide feedback on students’ work and inform them of their progress periodically; and treat them as individuals. In addition, a learning environment that encourages sharing learning experiences, builds a sense of community among students, and supports teamwork is desirable, (p-116).

**Conclusion**

In the analysis of the present study, four main factors emerged regarding challenges facing by the instructors of Virtual University of Pakistan in performance driven e-learning. These factors were Hiring of qualified professors, guidance and financial support to enhance enrollment, excessive technology access, overcome communication hindrances between the instructor and student. These factors are interlinked and influence each other also. It is a common practice among students that they hesitate to contact freely with their instructors, and this phenomenon results in misconceptions among students and instructors. And also results in risk of withdrawing from online course.

Finally, the informants proposed that physical contact of students and instructors and bilingual (using both English and Urdu) e-learning should be facilitated in Pakistan. Gahungu et al., (2006) also found similar findings that “online classrooms may not be an adequate substitute for face-to-face communication in some subject areas” (p.124). In a virtual mode of instruction, the student and instructor is compelled to contact through e-mail, but for increasing the effectiveness of this program, physical contact of both should be made possible for some occasions, to overcome the hesitation of the students. Finally, all participants admitted that virtual learning is an effective mode of learning in the context of a developing country where majority of virtual students are either working professionals or females of remote areas who cannot join traditional learning system for enhancing their capabilities.
References


