

# digital**LEARNING**

Learning Through ICTs

## Is E-learning the Future of Education?

*Posted by Elets News Network (ENN)*

*Posted on November 21, 2014*



In the past few years, there has been a huge surge in interest and adoption of online education. Undeniably, one of the main contributors in increasing this adoption has been the emergence of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) through companies like Coursera, EdX, Udacity and others. The numbers can help us understand how there has been a tectonic shift in acceptance and pervasiveness of these platforms. Coursera alone has over 9 million learners from over 190 countries. Outside US, the maximum number of sign-ups is from India, China and other developing countries.

While this is nothing short of a 'revolution' in education, it will be false to conclude that online education has been a recent phenomenon. Right from the early days of Internet, the potential of using it as a medium to teach and learn had been debated and tinkered with, but never were such results achieved. While there could be a lot of factors at play, a couple of them played a very key role and hence, deserve special mention. Firstly, evolution of technology has been a great enabler in the way learning content gets created, captured, curated and distributed. The barriers of cost and effort have been brought down and this has made online education scalable and successful. Secondly, as consumers, our comfort and propensity to interact with digital content, whether through

videos, webinars, audio or text, has increased significantly over the past 6-8 years. Inadvertently, this has made us, as learners, comfortable with and adaptive to digitised learning content.

Though there can be no debate on how online education has reached hitherto unknown scale and unexplored territory, predictions of online education replacing schools, colleges or universities seem to be unfounded. It is important to understand and acknowledge that there is a new way to teach and learn – through the power of Internet and mobile. But what we have achieved today is only in terms of using technology to connect a massively distributed set of learners with teachers. It definitely does not mean that we have perfected the art/science of teaching, for there is a lot more to high quality education than just creation and distribution of learning content. Cardinal aspects of learning in a classroom such as peer interaction, academic rigor, effective collaboration, credible evaluation form an indelible part of one's learning experience and need to be successfully replicated online.

While there are some very bright and promising startups working towards solving some of these aforementioned challenges, we are far away from figuring out what works best. Many of the globally reputed universities are employing a blended approach in executive education wherein candidates can access content and learn at their own convenience using Internet as a medium but also attend periodic (few days a month) sessions in classroom where the other aspects of learning are addressed. This approach ensures that every learner goes through a controlled and standardised learning experience, as opposed to learning outcomes being staggered and heavily dependent on the individual herself.

Educators and institutions need to look at online education as an opportunity rather than a challenge to their existence. High quality institutions have prevailed and will continue to do so while the mediocre ones will wither away as has always been the case. The MOOCs revolution has proved that there is a huge world of learners out there who are ready and willing to invest time, resources and effort to learn. The success and scale that you, as an educational institution or educator, can achieve through embracing the online medium is largely dependent on your ability to design and implement a high quality learning experience. It is imperative to realise that transposing all that happens in a classroom environment on an 'as-is' basis is not going to work. Employing a new medium for a dispersed audience needs a critical redesign of instruction, pedagogy and interaction. While the opportunity is immense, there is significant effort that educational institutions need to put in to ensure successful outcomes. And if it is any sort of inspiration, it may be worthwhile to note that the universities that are leading this 'revolution in education' are the ones with hallowed history and impermeable legacy – Harvard, Stanford, MIT among others. There can be no more portent an indicator of the times that are to come.

While there are many ideas around online education being experimented world over, there are some very promising concepts that could contribute towards a more empowered learning experience. Social learning, gamification and peer evaluation have demonstrated some success and may soon find their way into how courses and programmes are taught online. Another potential game changer could be mobile learning and given the impending 4G rollout in India, it will be interesting to see how things pan out in this regard. All in all, we are still in early days of online education and this opportunity will evolve, albeit at a much rapid pace than ever before.

The opportunity in terms of what technology can do for education and the promise it holds is undeniable. It is not uncommon to come across passionate debates on how the evolution and prevalence of online learning will challenge the hegemony of legacy brick and mortar institutions built over decades and centuries. However, it is important to not reduce this significant development into a trivial debate of 'us vs them'. If online education has to have a long-term bearing and high quality impact, it has to begin with supplementing classroom learning, growing in scale and constantly evolving in the process.

- Hari Nair

*The author is an Associate Director at Great Lakes ELearning, the online learning platform of Great Lakes Institute of Management, where he has been developing innovative online programs for over two years.*

- See more at: <http://digitallearning.eletsonline.com/2014/11/is-e-learning-the-future-of-education/#sthash.jX9G7H6g.dpuf>