Journal of Social Sciences and Media Studies
Vol. 01 Issue No. 01

CHALLENGES OF E-LEARNING IN PAKISTAN FROM STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

E-learning is an emerging trend which is promoting technological advancement in creating new knowledge and to spread information and ideas. Keeping in view the current tech-era, its bright future can easily be predicted and it can be suggested that e-learning will be the basic means of getting education for the next generation. But with any advancement there comes some drawbacks. This study aims at exploring the challenges a student face during the process of e-learning. This qualitative research tries to find out the major issues that create hurdles in effective learning process. Semi-structured interviews conducted with students having experience of e-learning. The result shows that students take e-learning as an empowerment given to them to enhance their educational capabilities. It provides access to information at their own pace with cost effectiveness to help them in being multi-skilled & multi-tasking. Study also reveals that for students it is difficult to maintain their focus, concentration and interest on serious learning portals due to over flow of information & entertaining stuff available on internet at the same time. Also the internet penetration in the country restricts a major population to get benefit from it. Students sometimes find it difficult to continue their learning due to the absence of face to face interaction. The results suggest that the curriculum devised for online learning should be interesting & attention catching so students do not get bored and are not distracted. Further, the more internet penetration will increase; the more students can get benefit from it.

Keywords: Challenges, e-learning, students, experience, Phenomenology

Introduction

With the technological advancement in 21st century, concepts have been shifted and transferred to entire new ideas and different paradigm. Among these concepts, a very important notion of learning has been introduced as e-learning.

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This has changed the whole idea and has now challenged the old practices of learning. With increasing technological scenario, we can anticipate further growing future of e-learning. Here, understanding the concept and challenges of e-learning becomes important.

E-learning itself has different understanding among scholars.

Defining e-learning

"E-learning is an approach to teaching and learning, representing all or part of the educational model applied, that is based on the use of electronic media and devices as tools for improving access to training, communication and interaction and that facilitates the adoption of new ways of understanding and developing learning." (Sangra et al., 2012). E-learning can be defined as the process in which computer technologies are being used. ((NRW Medien GmbH, 2003). Another study relates e-learning as a tool which is supported through software. (Baumgartner, Hafele and Maier-Hafele, 2001). Rosenberg (2001) suggests e-learning as a different paradigm as compared to the traditional and usual model. One study combines the use of computer technological advancement along with the aim of creation of knowledge with relevance of individual's experiences, observations and practices. (Tavangarian, 2004).

Pastor (2002) defines e-learning as getting instructions through internet technologies to get knowledge or information. Bowles (2004) in his book "Relearning to E-learning : Strategies for electronic learning and knowledge" shares the definition of e-learning as 'instructional content or learning experiences delivered or enabled through electronic media."

According to Khan (2003) e-learning is a novel approach that is well-structured, accessible, self-paced and a combination of digital resources and offline study material. (Khan, 2003)

Another definition of e-learning is the learning process through computer which requires four processes, starting from presenting, participating, accessing and then reviewing. (Brown & Voltz, 2005).

Criteria of e-learning

Rosenberg (2001) defines the criteria of e-learning as,

- It reaches the user through proper internet connection.
- It has the ability of immediate updating which transfers most updated information to the audience.
- It caters big audience as compared to the traditional & classroom learning. (Rosenberg, 2001)

Types of e-learning

Clark and Mayer (2008) classified e-learning as,

Standalone courses aim to serve solo learner, Virtual-classroom courses are online classes just like normal and traditional classes. Blended learning is the combination of online and offline learning, mobile learning needs mobile devices like smart phones. Knowledge management is the type which aims at educating and informing large groups rather than individuals. (Clark and Mayer, 2008)

Wagner (2012) explains few common ways in which e-learning is implemented like online learning, virtual classroom, rapid e-learning & mobile learning. (Wagner, 2012)

Internet penetration in Pakistan

In a report called, "The State of Broadband 2015: Broadband as a Foundation for Sustainable Development" which aims to identify the situation of digital development worldwide is published annually by a body of UNESCO to measure the indicators. The report suggests that Pakistan is among the countries with lowest internet penetration, the data on the web was outdated and didn't get corrected and updated by PTA specially. (bb-annual report, 2015)

According to internet service providers associations of Pakistan until October 2014, estimated internet users in Pakistan were 25 million, among which 15 million are mobile users and the number is further increasing. (ispak, 2014) PTA (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority) has claimed that mobile broadband subscribers will go up to 47 million by 2020 and will further increase to 79 million by 2025. (Dawn, 2015) PTA also called 2015 a huge turnout for Pakistan in internet world due to the access and availability of 3G and 4G networks, bringing more mobile subscribers to the market as compared to the past. It resulted in 34 % increase in internet users, which estimated 3.8 million in July 2014 to 16.9 million users by the end of 2015. (PTA, 2015)

Review of the Literature

Advantages & Disadvantages of e-learning

Any technological development may have positive as well as negative impacts on the target audience or on the users. The effect usually depends on the use of the product, experiences of individuals, background, observations, educational qualification and other basic parameters. So it can't be same for all and varies among situation to situation. Cook (2007) recommends web-based learning as a very powerful medium but at the same time recommends that it comes with its pros and cons. According to him the advantages includes the reduction of the barrier of time and space, different economical settings and options, innovative ideas and presentation of variety of multimedia tools like audio, video and text altogether to make it more interactive and novel. This study also reveals the drawbacks of e-learning

includes lacking in effective learning approach, creating societal isolation, increasing costs and too much technicalities lead to common technical problems. (Cook, 2007)

Offline education has a big drawback of time constraint but e-learning has majorly cope up with this issue and is now available to a bug variety of audience 24/7.

One more study discussed the drawback of e-learning as it has de-individualized people and the study also suggests the solution for this problem that online curriculum should be more individual focused rather than making it too general for a massive audience of millions online users. (Tavangarian et al., 2004)

Study on the comparisons of advantages and disadvantages of online learning suggest that this type of learning is highly flexible with time and location of the user. But at the same time, limited affordability, lacking in face-to-face interaction and feelings of isolation are coming as big threats. (O'Donoghue et al., 2004)

A study discussed uses of internet among students concluded that students use internet to maintain online identity, to impress their peers. They also entertain themselves while remaining online. They are updated on social media most of the time while keeping an eye on the world happening while being online. (Anderson, 2001)

A study suggests that students who performed well in traditional learning usually found it difficult to give output at online platform (Zhang, 2004). Another study intended to check the motivation of students in online versus offline or traditional classroom and it was concluded that motivation level of graduate students was high in online system as compared to the face-to-face classroom system. No difference in motivation level of undergraduate students was found (Rovai, 2007). One study on the same subject suggests that e-learning is although individual focused but needs to be more engaging between content and the learner so the interaction could be possible (Tavangarian, 2004).

Research Problem

E-learning is an emerging trend worldwide and with increasing internet penetration among the globe, its flow among the masses will be increasing. Students now take great benefit of these easily available tools and technologies in Pakistan as well to improve their skills, to get updated knowledge and to share what they know. Thus, this study aims at identifying the difficulties and challenges of e-learning that students face in Pakistan.

Research Questions

From the perspective of students,

I. What actually e-learning is?

II. What opportunities e-learning provides?

III. What challenges they face during the process of e-learning?

Objectives of the study

- To understand the concept of e-learning.
- To understand the opportunities e-learning provides.
- To ascertain the challenges students face during the process of e-learning

Husserl's phenomenological Method

Husserl's phenomenological method will be employed for this study to identify the actual phenomena. As this method deals with live experiences of individuals experience the same phenomena. To understand any situation, individuals' experiences are collected to take out the actual meaning lies behind it. These experiences are then gathered and interpreted to describe phenomena. Here, participants' understanding and experiences of e-learning and its challenges will be kept in consideration.

The Design

Semi-structured interview questionnaire was prepared and participants were interviewed according to their availability. Interviews were transcribed in a verbatim way. Experiences of participants in form of statements with relevance of the study bracketed out. Themes and clusters emerged from these statements to help in understanding the desired phenomena.

Limitation of the study

As study is qualitative in nature and the sampling size is less as compared to the usual sampling size in quantitative research, so the result requires similarity in context to match in order to be applicable.

Data Collection

Primary and secondary data used in the study in form of previous researches and in-depth interviews of participants. They were assured their privacy and were informed the purpose of the research and its implications. Whole procedure of the interview was explained to each participant before the actual interview was conducted. Participants were given necessary instructions and their anonymity was assured.

Data Treatment

- Transcribed interviews of all participants were read.
- Relevant statements were highlighted and extracted.

- Meanings were derived from extracted statements.
- Themes emerged and formulated.
- Clusters of created themes were formed.
- Clusters were then explained to answer research questions.
- Analysis was then matched with the raw data to find the synchronization.

Population

Research has a very limited population due to its qualitative nature. Small but focused individuals were interviewed to get the desired data. 50 individuals with vast experience and exposure of e-learning were part of this research. Specially, those who are getting professional education including certificates, diplomas or degrees (in any discipline) through e-learning process are preferred.

Sampling

Participants have been chosen through purposive sampling technique. Only individuals with sound knowledge, background and experience of e-learning have been chosen.

Setting

Participants were asked for their availability and they were interviewed in a very informal meeting to make the environment comfortable for them and to make the process of interview smooth.

Validity and Reliability

Final interpretation of the created themes and clusters were matched with raw data to validate the findings. Outcomes were also shared with participants to confirm whether it is true representation of their thoughts and ideas.

Discussion of the findings

Table 1: Participants understanding of e-learning (significant statements)	
1. Something related to the electronic device	25. Using internet for learning
2. Learning through internet	26. Acquiring degrees online
3. It is online learning	27. Quick and easy information
4. Surfing ideas through the web	28. Learning skills online
5. Process of online teaching	29. Interacting with others to learn
6. Getting information on my own	30. Getting information in seconds
7. Knowledge that is accessible	31. E means electronic
8. Self-paced learning	32. Reliable way of learning
9. Instruments that teach me what I want	33. Every electronic gadget involved

10. Using Internet to get knowledge	34. Flexible form of learning
11. Surfing the web	35. Cost effective process of information gauging
12. Learning while sitting at your own place	36. Process of self-improvement
13. A way of learning involve modern technologies	37. Online learning that saves time
14. Learning in the technological era	38. Learning that is available online all the time
15. Getting full advantage of electronic gadgets in learning things	39. Individual focused
	40. Electronic methods involved
16. Modern way of learning	41. Learning that requires technological expertise
17. Online learning world wide web	42. Way of finding solutions online
18. Learning that spread to millions of people worldwide	43. Accessible mode of getting information
	44. Cost effective, self-paced, time-saving
19. Communicating new ideas to the world through internet	45. It involves you with gadget
	46. Self-paced form of learning
20. Introducing more advance way in learning	47. Learning online through computer
21. Learning online	48. Learning online through internet
22. Learning through machines	
23. Knowledge of World Wide Web	
24. Easy flow of information	

Example 1: Statement 2-4 has been taken from this thought of a participant "It is online learning, basically it relates with surfing the web for getting the relevant information and ideas. Shortly, we should call it the process of learning through the internet."

Example 2: Statement 21-24 have been derived from following account of participant "This is online learning which involve machines and give knowledge through World Wide Web. It has very easy flow of information. Basically, it is the usage of internet for learning.

Example 3: Statement 41-45 have been taken from "A form of learning that requires technological expertise, to find out solutions in the online world, it is easily accessible, cost effective, self-paced & time-saving. It completely makes you involved in your gadget.

Table 2: Opportunities e-learning provide	
1. It is good, time saving	28. Bundle of information available
2. It is easy	29. Mass audience creates intercultural harmony
3. It teaches self -responsibility	30. Increase online socialization
4. E-learning saves time	31. Easy way of getting knowledge
5. No need to go anywhere	32. Variety of options
6. Self-paced	33. Always available according to needs
7. Being at your own place in great	34. Caters demands
8. Multimedia helps	35. Helping hand
9. It's not boring and monologue	36. Time saving
10. Online community helps	37. Less hectic and empowering
11. Not so expensive	38. Make you realize your inner strength
12. Vast audience	39. Create attitude of Self-dependency
13. Multimedia is interactive	40. Reliable and cost effective
14. Presents innovative ideas	41. Works on one on one basis
15. It's different	42. Provides sense of responsibility
16. It facilitates in all ways	43. Teaches time management
17. Time saving	44. Provides number of opportunities
18. Your study in your own room	45. Great way of networking
19. Its empowerment	46. Group work and discussions become helpful
20. It adds new skill to profile	47. Minimize the distance
21. Greater access to information	48. 24/7 availability
22. It is cost effective	49. Do whenever you want
23. Saves time	50. Location doesn't matter
24. Don't have to go anywhere	51. Save money and time which consumes in transportation
25. Great opportunity for skill development	
26. Money saving, time saving	52. Focused and individual based
27. Multimedia creates interest	53. Variety of topics available
	54. Easy to understand

Example: Following is the transcript for Statement 1-3 "It's good, easy and time-saving, which teaches self-responsibility by making the user responsible for completing target within given deadlines, although there is much other entertaining stuff available. But user completes his task and shows the gesture of responsibility."

Example 2: Statement 19-23 have been derived from this transcript: "e-learning empowers students; Students become able to learn new skill and expertise by sitting at home. It has great amount of information which we get easily and the good part is that it's not much expensive and saves time."

Example 3: Statement 47-51 concludes from "It has minimized the actual distance and is now available 24/7. Learn whenever you want, location literally doesn't matter. In this way, it saves time and money which may otherwise consume through transportation.

Table 3: Challenges of e-learning in Pakistan (Significant Statements)

1. It is difficult	33. Group work angle is missed
2. Too much technical	34. Fellow students can't get along with you
3. Gives feeling of loneliness among millions	35. Internet speed sometimes create problems
4. It's tough to focus	36. Learning through decreased humanitarian angle
5. Electric Load shedding is a big issue	37. Feels virtual
6. Slow internet connection disturbs	38. Information is over-flowed
7. Can't Concentrate	39. Too much text becomes boring
8. There is no face to face interaction	40. It's not interesting
9. Feeling virtually bound	41. Other things catch attention
10. Difficult to focus on reality	42. Material becomes boring
11. It is tough	43. Tough to focus and concentrate
12. Concentration usually diverted	44. Over-flow of information usually distracts
13. There is too much flow of communication	45. Challenging at times
14. Have to struggle to focus	46. Difficult to differentiate between fake and reliable information
15. It's boring, I can't focus	47. You don't know your peers
16. If internet doesn't work properly, you are lost	48. Zero element of competition
17. Hard to concentrate among other entertaining stuff	49. Difficult to manage time
18. Lack of interaction with course instructor	50. Cause dizziness
19. Concentration usually distracts	51. Waste time with parallel online activities
20. Slow internet speed	52. Load-shedding is huge issue
21. Technical issues are hard to solve	53. Divert attention to entertaining stuff
22. Lacking in direct and one on one interaction	54. Time-consuming sometimes
23. "Teacher" element is missing	55. Lack of peer interactive
24. Proper classroom system is missing	56. Full time instructor is missing
25. Entertaining material on the web distract serious learning mood	57. Unreliable information available
26. Involved technicalities	58. Totally self-dependent

27. Hard to focus	59. Difficult to get immediate reply
28. Direct interaction is really missing	60. Lack in Face to face, one on one interaction
29. Internet connection	61. Not according to the mood of all individuals
30. Lack of interaction	62. Not friendly
31. Electricity problems	63. Requires extra skills
32. Feeling of loneliness	64. Internet speed matter
	65. Speed at both end requires

Example 1: Statement 1-3 has been derived following thoughts of a participant "It is difficult because too much technicalities involved in it, which sometimes become hard to manage. Although there are millions of registered participants in any course or many surfing the net for the same material and learning the same things but still it creates the feelings of being lonely among many. Because usually there is no classroom setup and you are alone to work on it."

Example 2: Transcript for the statement 37-41 is as following "In an online learning, everything in the real world feels like virtual. Information is over-loaded and there is no one to one interaction so it becomes highly boring which diverts the attention towards other interesting material which is more attention catching and interesting."

Example: Statements 61-65 have been taken from, "It usually is not according to the mood of all individuals, and for me it is not all the time friendly, it also requires extra skills. Not only this, but internet speed also matters at your side as well as at the other end."

Table 4. Clusters of Common themes of "e-learning"

1. **Online learning**
    a. Learning online through internet
    b. Surfing the websites for the purpose of learning
2. **Learning through technology**
    a. Learning with the help of technological advancement
    b. Involving electronic gadgets in the process of learning

Table 5. Clusters of common themes of "Opportunities of e-learning"

1. **Time saving and self-paced**
    a. E-learning saves time of students by making it available at their free time
    b. It is also self-paced and reaches the audience at their own place.

2. **Easy access to information**
    a. Great amount of information is available online all the time.
    b. Easy access to most of the information makes it easier for students to learn more.
    c. Bundle of information helps in being multi-tasking and multi-skilled
3. **Create Self-dependency**
    a. It teaches time management and positive learning attitude
    b. Help learner in being self-dependent
    c. Create the ability to focus and concentrate
4. **Networking**
    a. Provide networking opportunities
    b. Offer Groups work and team building exercises
    c. Chances of knowing the unknown
5. **Cost effective**
    a. Most of the information online is available free of cost.
    b. In case of fee or charges, it is very nominal and reasonable.

Table 6. Cluster of common themes of "Challenges of e-learning"

1. **Lack of concentration**
    a. Concentration usually distracts while focusing on any subject, issue or topic.
    b. Entertaining stuff which is more interesting and eye catching catches the attraction of user.
    c. It becomes very difficult to focus on serious issues by avoiding engaging and enjoyable online material.
2. **Absence of face-to-face interaction**
    a. Classroom based traditional learning setup is largely ignored
    b. There is a big gap of physical meet ups
    c. Lacking in interaction leads to de-motivation
    d. Direct contact solves many issues on the spot, virtually this angle is missed
3. **Technical problems/Issues**
    a. Internet speed and penetration is a big issue
    b. E-learning requires technical expertise which restricts many individuals

c. Electricity shortage or load shedding becomes a big hurdle

4. Over-flow of information

a. Information on the internet is over-flowed which creates confusion

b. Much data also distracts users from the actual desired information

5. **Over-relaxing attitude**

a. Without one-on-one interaction, psychologically relaxation is felt

b. This cause difficulty in time management

c. It also cause lack of concentration

6. Role of mentoring is missing

a. Role of teacher, supervisor, an available mentor is missing

b. A role model is required

c. It becomes difficult to share real life issue and problems

7. Feelings of Loneliness

a. Online learning is more individual focused so it ignores the collective nature of a group

b. Students feel lonely without their class fellows, teachers and a proper class setup.

Table 7. Exhaustive interpretation of e-learning

Students take e-learning as a proper system of online learning which requires electronic gadgets and technological advancement easily available to them at their own time and pace.

Table 8. Exhaustive interpretation of opportunities of e-learning

E-learning provides students with enough opportunities to enhance their skills, information and knowledge. It facilitates by being cost-effective, time saving and self-paced. It creates plurality by engaging huge audience at the same time. Multimedia functions help in keeping interest in the content. Material is individual focused and gives the sense of empowerment by providing learning opportunities to all. It also creates the sense of reliability and self-dependency. It teaches individual to manage time and deadlines even when the other person is not face to face available. It helps in building networks in the virtual world. It helps a person in creating online identity.

Table 9. Exhaustive interpretation of challenges of e-learning

Keeping in view the Pakistan's scenario, Electricity problem and internet penetration becomes a huge challenge. Element of face-to-face interaction with the peers and course instructor is missing. This reduced students' trust and reliability on the system, also makes them lazy in focusing on the given direction and sometimes caused hurdles in following deadlines. Over flow of information also disturbs the users by distracting their focus. Entertaining stuff also contributes in losing concentration. A role model and a mentor are missing in the process, peer to peer interaction and class-room competitive environment is lacking strongly. Particular online expertise required to be successful.

Conclusion

This study concludes that e-learning becomes the great source of benefit for the students by providing them chance to learn whatever they are interested in at their own pace and time. Knowledge is thoroughly available on their desired subjects which can be utilized any time. But at the same time over-flow of information restricts them to move ahead with their particular range and increase their confusion. Multimedia factor in e-learning helps students in developing their interest and interaction throughout the process but again it involves too much technicalities which requires extra skills. Internet has variety of online material which distracts students from serious portals, discussion forums and their study. Students used the internet to keep and maintain their identity on social media and to remain in touch with their friends, colleagues, relatives. They also keep themselves updated with latest entertaining stuff including music, films, videos, documentaries etc. While performing all these tasks they are also managing their learning process online, so the distraction is very obvious in this situation.

Simultaneously lack of face to face interaction makes it virtually focused and creates the sense of being "alone" in the virtual world. Experiences of offline group studies, peers, teacher-student direct relation are also missed in this type of learning. It is also very demanding and dependent on students' side.

Electricity problems, internet penetration in the country and internet speed also become hurdle in smooth process of e-learning. All these caused demotivation in the collective attitude of learners.

Suggestions

Results of this study suggests that curriculum, course outlines and activities for e-learning should be designed very carefully, it should be interesting and interactive at the same time so user doesn't get bored and may be able to maintain their focus and concentration on the material. Visuals should be eye-catching and should be able to seek attention. Results reveal that e-learning also demands an active supervisor's role to keep an eye on each participant, group work

should be right balanced along with individual's activities. Results also suggest that improvement of technological advancement in the country will improve the process of e-learning and it will progress further.

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