

Sociological and Psychological Dimensions of E-learning

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Abstract

The globalization concept prevailing in our times has revolutionized many sectors of our everyday activities, which have become more demanding. It is generally agreed that certain deficiencies in education and training have delayed and deferred developments in many countries. Economic realities have been changed resulting to significant impact on enterprises. To cope with the emerging demands, businesses have to change their strategic plans in regard to their training programs and adapt to the requirements of knowledge-based and skill-based economy. This means that the qualifications of workforce have to be upgraded, whereas prospective employees should be educated in a way to meet their current market demands. In the present state of our civilization people have time off work, which, however, is not adequate to give the workforce the chance to upgrade their qualifications or to individuals to pursue educational courses through classroom attendance. Besides, economic problems are an additional problem for educational/ training courses delivery on campus. The advent of e-learning will facilitate the implementation of educational and/or training courses to everybody interested. In this paper discussion will be focused on two dimensions of e-learning, the sociological and psychological, based on empirical research carried out among educationists, sociologists, psychologists, teachers and end-users. In the sociological sector focus will be given to relationship between educational planning and economic, political, cultural and social forces of the society. The relation between teachers and students and the role of behaviors of the participants in the e-learning educational systems will be analyzed. In an e-learning environment emphasizing learning-centered activity and system interactivity, the impact of psychology promotes self-management focused on the enactment of learning goals, self-monitoring, motivation of students to achieve quality educational outcomes, Learners are no longer the object of educational guidance and obligations but the subject of their education and learning autonomy. Finally, this paper provides recommendations on how sociological and psychological dimensions of e-learning can influence the most effective implementation of the system.

Keywords: E-learning, Sociological dimensions, psychological dimensions

Introduction

E-learning seems to be the most reliable contemporary media of knowledge distribution even to the most remote geographical areas and/or boundaries where students can be reached regionally, nationally and even globally. This merit is recognized by a great number of researchers, analysts, educators and end-users. In parallel, this rather revolutionary means of delivery of educational and/or training courses is considered to be the most effective in meeting the overall market demands arising from the advent of globalization. Though

globalization is one of the most debated issues of our times eliciting both great enthusiasm and deep concern. United Nations, to develop and manage a global organization means to teach people how to think, lead and act. This means that people will have to be made to possess a global mind as well as global skills. Therefore, globalization is not only a movement of intensified flow, between countries, of goods, services and cultural activities but is involved in a variety of trends and tendencies which result to a multidimensional character. On the threshold of the second decade of the 21st century, the e-learning educational and/or training courses delivery medium is the most effective means of support of businesses in their effort to change their strategic plans for upgrading their programs and enable their workforce to cope with the emerging multidimensional demands of globalization. It is accepted that education, at any level, is a complete, dynamic system. It develops and transforms from one condition to another, in the process of its function, under the influence of external factors. Undoubtedly, one of the most important factors influencing the development of educational systems nowadays is e-learning. At the moment it is the unique system which is based on technological means of instruction, eliminates geographical boundaries and intergrades academic and real world characteristics providing students with wider and more affordable choices. Moreover, in a pluralistic society, like ours, this courses delivery medium results to a re-orientation of traditional schools and makes possible an amazing integration of global resources.

Learning Consequences of Globalization

E-learning Trends

Globalization has revolutionized literally every sector of our everyday activities. Economic realities have dictated to businesses to change their strategic plans as concerns their training programs, has facilitated individuals to take educational courses through e-learning courses delivery and enabled educationists to adapt their curricula to the requirements of knowledge-based and skill-based demands of economy. In parallel, e-learning environments facilitate the development of intercultural awareness in students. In consequence of these trends, schools are expected not only to be concerned with learners' intellectual, moral and social development by means of opening up access to worthwhile knowledge and experiences, but also to be involved in their socialization inducting them into the customs, conventions and accepted practices in society. In view of the foregoing a representative sample of education participants selected at random were asked to complete a 20 items EPS (Educational Participation Scale) and rate the importance of certain factors connected with the teaching process and particularly the specific merits of e-learning which make the difference as compared to the traditional theories for learning. In fact, the basic framework for web-based electronic learning includes a number of distinctive characteristics.

To identify the most important dimensions of this medium, this survey has been drafted to be the "prelude" of a reliable analysis of the findings of empirical researches aiming to secure the most effective implementation of e-learning mode in the educational and/or training courses delivery. In particular, the concept was to confirm or to proceed to modification, where necessary, of the teaching theory concerning the nature of human interests and motivations which emphasize the psychological and sociological dimensions of e-learning. Thus, the findings of this survey were taken into consideration when drafting the problem-questions of the empirical researches which were connected to the identification of the role of sociological and psychological dimensions of e-learning.

Sociological Dimensions

The globalization of the economy brings together people of different hemispheres, cultures and civilizations. Therefore, people who need to communicate and understand each other have to cope with social demands as well. To this end the most important objective of education is socialization. This educational concept has been reaffirmed in a series of ministerial decisions which considered the social dimension of crucial importance and integral part of learning processes. It is to be noted that in all meetings held in Bologna (June 1999), Prague (May 2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (May 2005), London (May 2007) and Leuven (April 2009) the resulting declarations emphasized the social dimension of learning with specific attention to the enlargement of the Bologna process. Through the empirical research, educational participants of varying level were asked to complete a 25 factors questionnaire and rate them according to the importance of the role that the sociological dimension of e-learning is considered to play in the whole education process. The scale of evaluation ranged from 1 to 5 where 1 stands for quite unimportant and 5 very important. A further qualitative (unstructured interviewing and case studies) analysis of the responses concluded to 10 priority factors pertaining to the social dimension of e-learning as follows:

The sociological dimension of e-learning gives the possibility to learners:

- a. To cope with market demands successfully 95%
- b. To implement structured and goal oriented course material 92%
- c. To enjoy practical benefits for everyday working life 89%
- d. To enjoy equal opportunities in education 84%
- e. To raise the level of knowledge, skills and competencies 82%
- f. To facilitate the approach of educational courses for everyone, anytime, anywhere 81%
- g. To be active members of their social environments 80%
- h. To ensure appropriate socialization through internet connections and communication. 76%
- i. To diminish obstacles to course attendance related to their social and/or economic background 75%
- j. To eliminate class conflict with work responsibilities which reduces commuting time and flexibility in studying 73%?

Ours is an era of magnificent, impressive and rapid change in technology science, thought, culture and intellect. If we are, then, to meet the resulting economic, technological and demographic challenges successfully we must proceed to revolutionary reforms to educational practices. Obviously, there has been so far a serious gap between ideal and reality in the educational system in a number of countries, mainly undeveloped or under development. How a teacher transforms, or attempts to transform ambitious ideas into practical reality is disputed nowadays. One reason is that in the twentieth century more was expected of teachers whereas, at the same time, quite paradoxically, their authority had been increasingly questioned. The contemporary concept about the role of education prioritizes its sociological and psychological dimensions which provide the means to stimulate thinking and communicate ideas with real impact through technology and innovative media of courses delivery. Indeed, education must go step-in-step with the development in the society.

Psychological Dimensions

Motivation is a dynamic powerful drive which enables individuals to attain the objectives of their everyday lives and mainly their educational and/or training goals. Motivation facilitates autonomous learning which is considered to be an effective vehicle for learners to identify their goals, formulate and even change them to suit their own learning needs and interests.

The types of motivation are intrinsic or extrinsic. In the first case it refers to the determination of behavior related to an activity and sustained with autonomous acts and interests which can be considered as relating to the self determination theory. On the other hand, extrinsic refers to external interests. This theory supports that man's actions are determined by his own nature, character or volition and constitutes an approach to learning which requires learners to exercise a high level of control over their source of motivation. The higher the motivation the better the performance. Undoubtedly, the desire for knowledge leads to learning outside the classroom. Unlike other theories, self determination theory addresses the energization and direction issues by postulating about basic psychological needs that are inherent in human life. As a result of the implementation of the self-determination theory motivation, performance and development are maximized within a social context which makes it possible for people to satisfy their psychological needs for competence and autonomy. To identify cognitive and psychological factors which differentiate e-learning course delivery media from traditional classroom attendance an empirical research was carried out in the brief span of four months. The sample of 136 education participants was randomly selected among individuals of varying levels, i.e. psychologists 30 (22.05%), policy makers 36 (26.47%), researchers 34 (25%), teaching staff 20 (14.72%) and end-users 16 (11.76%), of which male 72 (52.94%) and female 64 (47.06%). Interviewees were asked to complete a 30 factors questionnaire and rate them according to the importance they attach to the psychological dimension of e-learning. The scale of evaluation ranged from 1 (quite unimportant) to 5 (very important). A further qualitative (including unstructured interviewing and case studies) analysis of the responses concluded to 10 priority factors of psychological dimensions of e-learning, as follows:

- a. Freedom of choosing the pace of study 96%
- b. Goal directed educational courses as a result of self-management 94%
- c. Motivation for further attendance of higher education courses 90%
- d. Better time management for studies 86%
- e. Effective autonomous behavior 80%
- f. Improved self-discipline 82%
- g. Formulation of learners' characters 80%
- h. Development of useful learning tasks 79%
- i. Learners' relationship with other users 75%
- j. Development of intrinsic desires for attainment of targets and knowledge 73%.

Based on the analysis of the responses given by the interviewees during the unstructured interviews a very important concept has been revealed, namely pressure from teachers and/or administrators and/or parent groups result to negative effects on the learners' self determination, conceptual learning and personal adjustment.

Conclusion

The qualitative analyses of the findings of the atypical survey as well as the empirical researches which followed revealed the positive impact of e-learning media in our attempt to meet the contemporary globalization demands quite successfully. Whereas some drawbacks of e-learning have been identified as pertaining to technological factors the importance of motivators, both intrinsic and extrinsic, have enjoyed a wide recognition. Moreover, the high rating of importance attached to the sociological and psychological dimensions of e-learning consolidates the notion that e-learning developers should consider the impact of these dimensions on the educational and/or training courses delivery since the desired outcome is to secure the best effectiveness of the system. Since learning goals have been transformed in

order to meet the current demands, it is important that educators, policy makers and other educational participants might be necessary to take into consideration.

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