Psychological and Operational Challenges in Educational Field amidst Pandemic

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Abstract: Educational sector is one of the most affected areas during the current pandemic Covid-19. The main objective of this article is to identify those challenges that educational sector is currently facing as a result of the outbreak of Covid-19 and propose possible solutions to each of such issues. It has been observed that these challenges could be categorized into two i.e., psychological challenges and operational challenges. The study also proposes a conceptual research model for successful implementation of E-learning strategies for imparting education.

Keywords: *E-learning; Education; Operational Challenges; Psychological Challenges; Technology Acceptance.*

1. Introduction

One of the challenges that any education system across the globe has is their inability to contribute to the system since they have little information on who is learning and who is not (World Bank, 2019). A classroom is a miniature replica of this phenomenon wherein if the teacher does not know who is attending the class and who is not which could in turn produce an unsatisfied teacher. This is the current situation with educational systems across the world where no one has any idea about the teaching and learning of others due to lockdown / quarantine pressed upon us by the outbreak of Covid-19. The main objective of this article is to identify those challenges that educational sector is currently facing as a result of the outbreak of Covid-19 and propose possible solutions to each of such issues. It has been observed that these challenges could be categorized into two i.e., psychological challenges and operational challenges.

2. Rationale

Novel Coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak has brought about unimaginable changes in all walks of life. Quarantine, social distancing, self-isolation etc., have left millions of people around the world to lead a life away from community. The education sector too has been a victim of Covid-19 outbreak wherein educational institutions have been asked to shut down indefinitely in order to curb the menace of this virus. As a result of this uncertainty, in an unprecedented move, most of the educational institutions have switched over to online teaching so as to ensure that the students continue to receive academic input remotely. Academicians and students across the world are facing such a situation probably for the first time in their life wherein they are forced to be away from the educational institutions where they used spend one quarter of their day. At this juncture, it is of great importance to identify those challenges that are likely to be faced by the stakeholders of E-learning process so as to propose a model which can ensure successful implementation of such process. The ideas presented in this study would be greater relevance to an international arena since the current situation has affected each and every one of us adversely.

3. Psychological challenges

3.1. Loss of continuity

Irrespective of the age or profession of the student, today's educational system provides education without limits to human being throughout their lifetime (Vernitski & Ribakina, 2014). This is based on the principle that learning is continuous. Noddings (2007) argued that continuity is indispensable for teachers to adopt adequate care for the students that could instill qualitative improvements in life. One of the major educational challenges that both teachers and students face in the e-learning is the loss of continuity in their teaching and learning process. This coupled with an uncertain future course of activities places them to remain indoors most of the time, if not completely. There occurs a cessation of the continuous learning which otherwise would have happened during their school / college days. This loss of continuity could in turn hamper their academic and social progress. The possible solution at this trying time is to get connected through each other electronically. There are so many platforms through which teachers can interact with their students remotely. However, it is a matter of concern whether data network facilities would be available in many rural areas of developing countries.

3.2. Attitude towards e-learning option

Moses et al., (2013) observed that user's attitude towards accepting the technology is influenced by their perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use of the technology. Both teachers and students have their own reservations regarding the capabilities of online teaching to be at par with the traditional classroom teaching. Attitude plays an important role in the adoption of educational opportunity (Messick, 1979). They generally apprehend that the connectivity between the teacher and the student can be severely comprised in online teaching depending upon the kind of IT infrastructure available for both these categories. Bhuasiri et al. (2012) observed that success of e-learning implementations depends upon the technology awareness, motivation and change in the behavior of the beneficiary. Moreover, teachers feel that the pulse of students could not be properly identified through online teaching. Possible solution to plus this issue to get the teachers more familiarised to technology through appropriate interventions from time to time so that they develop a positive attitude towards usage of technology for imparting knowledge.

3.3. Lack of community feeling and / or isolation

Baker (2010) observed that students who feel a sense of connectedness and psychological proximity would be exhibiting higher order thinking and knowledge by actively involved with online learning. Luo et al., (2017) asserted that the sense of community prevails when there is a significant level of student-instructor interaction which in turn will result in better acceptance of e-learning platform. Unlike in the traditional classroom, the e-learning has less room for allowing the close interaction between teacher and student. Feeling of being in the same community is thus missing in the e-learning facilities even though there are software that allow two-way communication between teacher and student. Majority of such platforms is likely to inculcate a feeling of loneliness unless either party have completely engrossed into the subject. This lack of community feeling and / or isolation is likely to adversely affect the effectiveness of e-learning as a replacement for traditional classroom. One of the solutions to resolve this issue is to have other modes of communications also, apart from the online classes. Such interactions would enhance the acceptance of e-learning sessions by the learner.

4. Operational challenges

4.1. Technology adaptation within short span of time

Any technology needs to be accepted by its users. This acceptance will be generally based two dimensions i.e., perceived ease-of-usage of technology and perceived usefulness of the technology (Davis, 1989). Darling-Hammond et al., (2020) identified that in order to help teachers to optimal use of technology in remote sessions require substantial preparation time for the instructor before such sessions. In the current scenario, teachers need to acquaint themselves with those educational technologies which are essential for connecting with students remotely within short span of time available for them. Preparation of presentation slides, technical know-how to manage the e-learning process, challenges in ensuring the attention of students, hurdles in the way of carrying out assessments etc., post greater challenges for the teachers to master these activities through online teaching. Institutional support in getting trained on these technologies is the need of the hour that could go a long way in developing positive outlook on the part of teachers towards technology assisted teaching.

4.2. Communication challenges

Communication and public relations play a crucial role in managing risks and crises during unforeseen occurrences (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). Every sphere of activities need better communication facilities during crisis period. At this time of pandemic, any communication gap between the school administration and other stakeholders would adversely affect the initiation of alternative modes of teaching and learning. Scheduling e-learning classes, communicating the same to all stakeholders, providing enough time for them respond back, ensuring all teachers and students are available at the right time for e-learning etc., would be yet another great challenge that could affect the educational process during these trying times. Proactive behavior on the part of the administration of educational institution could only bridge communication gaps among all stakeholders through appropriate planning and implementation of various strategies.

4.3. Difficulty in ensuring parity while delivering remote teaching

Zapalska and Brozik (2006) observed that learners should be exposed to variety of learning experiences even if they learn best in a certain ways. As such one of the ways through which such parity could be ensured is through blending face-to-face learning with online learning. Rodríguez-Ardura and Meseguer-Artola (2016) observed cognitive styles of the learners played an important role in their abilities to perceive, remember, think, solve problems etc. In a traditional classroom set up, it would be an easier task for the teacher to gather attention of students through various reinforcements. On the other hand, such reinforcements would not be applicable in online teaching wherein it would be more likely to be a one-way communication between the teacher and students. Thereby, it would be more of transferring knowledge without getting even an iota of feeling that the transferred knowledge has reached the students in its entire form. Adoption of variety of exercises such online quizzes, tests, assessments etc., at regular intervals would ensure adequate level of parity in the delivery of online sessions.

4.4. Infrastructural facilities to host e-learning classes

Arabasz and Baker (2003) identified that due to lagging e-learning course activities and smaller resource bases, most of the private institutions do not offer the full complement of resources. As such, another great challenge that educational institutions face at this time is to ensure that they do have information technology infrastructure in place to ensure consistent and effective e-learning classes are delivered by the teachers. In this regard, managers of the institutions play a vital role in providing mechanisms to

ensure that students continue to use the technology through enhanced interactions (Luo et al., 2017). It is all the more challenging for institutions that have large number of students on their roll because it requires more bandwidth in terms of data services to cater to large number of students. Also, concurrent teaching by various teachers will consume more data for which bandwidth of the IT network has to be strong. However, there are certain companies that offer the platform for hosting these classes mostly free of cost. These platforms are the products of the shelf which needs to be fine-tuned to meet the requirement of teachers and students alike.

4.5. Hindrances for inclusive education

Inclusive education involves acceptance of all students alike irrespective of their diversity and capabilities. Inclusive education implies that the educational system itself should prepare to integrate the students into mainstream rather than just focusing only on the student (Meskhi et al., 2019). They identified that e-learning can be efficient for inclusive education provided it is delivered in conjunction with conventional learning. During this lockdown period, education sector is going to encounter difficulties in implementing inclusive education. In traditional classroom, teacher could adequately provide more attention to those who are part of the inclusive education. Imparting inclusive education might be difficult, if not impossible through e-learning process. However, there are assistive technologies in the current era which can be successfully used to increase, improve or maintain capabilities of persons with disabilities (Bjekic et al., 2012). Also, as uncertainty over the recovery period from the current pandemic looms indefinite, there is a need to explore various other avenues through which inclusive education could be imparted.

5. Conceptual Research Model

In the wake of above discussions, we suggest the following conceptual model to be enacted upon by all relevant stakeholders of e-learning process so as to ensure effective implementation of the e-learning programs as given in Fig – 1.
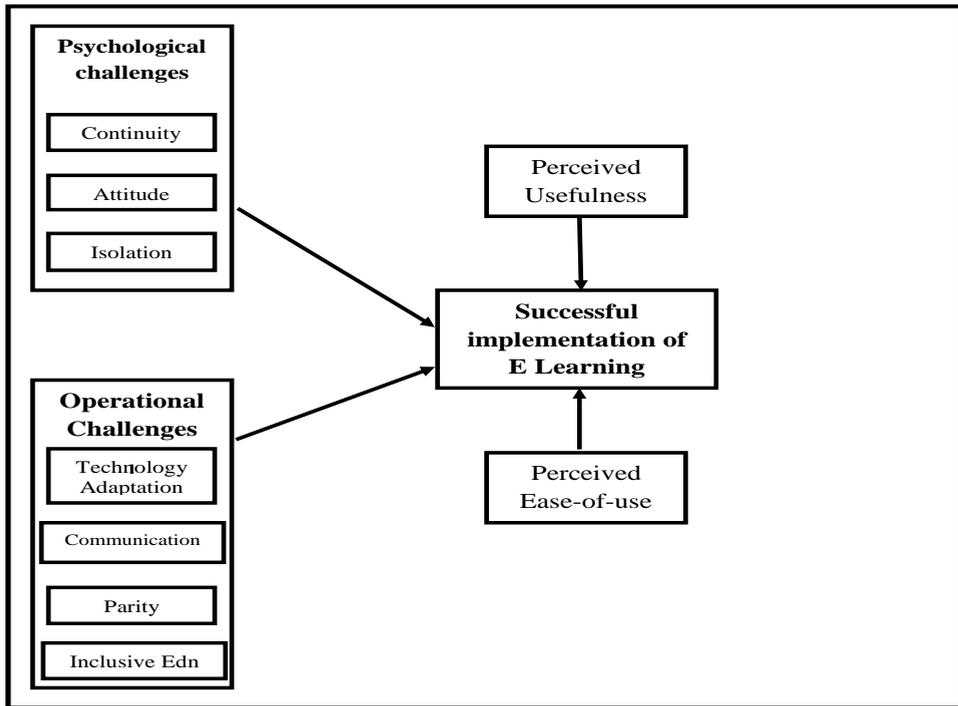
Fig – 1 Research Conceptual Model
Source: Authors' own conception

6. Conclusions

This study urges the international educational community to devise a plan to implement e-learning strategies in the wake of Covid-19 outbreak by incorporating both operational and psychological challenges that academicians are likely to face at this juncture. This plan coupled with their perception of usefulness and perception of ease-of-use could bring about considerable mitigation of hindrances for successful implementation of remote teaching. Nihuka and Voogt (2011) rightly pointed out that the challenges related to operational aspects and motivation of instructors to use e-learning technologies must be considered before deciding on any technology. This study also proposes that there should be sufficient time allotted before accepting any technological means of imparting education so as to ensure that both the learnt and the learner are on the same frequency as far as the process is concerned.

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