

Online / Distance Learning – Feedbacks A Priority!

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Abstract

A matter of current interest in recent times has been the noticeable growth experienced in the field of online higher education (OHE) and worldwide expansion, with higher educational institutions (HEI's) offering a variety of programs. This phenomenal growth is mainly attributed to rapid digital transformations and a considerably improved demand for lifelong learning! It is preferred by a segment of the diaspora who have opted for higher education much later in life or would have faced obstacles as economic constraints, or failure in adjusting to work schedules, geographical and social barriers. Flexibility and access without time or geographical restrictions have been the most common reasons for preferring this mode of study. Feedback is a necessary skill for online instructors. Feedback is an important intervention for the online educator because it is an opportunity to develop the instructor-learner relationship, improve academic performance, and enhance learning. Effective online feedback from educators to learners is able to guide learners toward positive learning outcomes.

An estimated 5.5 to 7.1 million students take at least one online course in the US according to the US Education Department and Babson Survey Research Group as reported by Kolowich (2014). India in recent years has found increased acceptance of the online education system, and students and working professionals have taken to different e-learning platforms in order to enhance their skills. A report released by KPMG India and Google indicates (Online Education in India: 2021), "the market for online education in India was expected to witness a magnificent growth of eight times in three years, i.e., from USD 247 million in 2016 to USD 1.96 billion in 2021". This market is expected to grow multiple-folds in the next few years.

An implication of providing effective online feedback is the positive impact for online learner performance.

Date of Submission: 24-09-2024

Date of Acceptance: 04-10-2024

I. Introduction

Feedback Defined

Feedback could be defined as a criticism, advice or reaction based on one's behaviour or action commented upon by another individual describing the person's behaviour or action, that could be used by that person to either correct, adjust or improve in future! Feedback is a good thing from all aspects, as it helps one to improve, adjust or reframe his actions, so that one becomes a bit more efficient or a better one'. To quote Jennings "Feedback helps in multiple ways to create a better workplace environment - keeps everyone on track, creates better relationships, avoids major mistakes, helps personal and professional growth, motivation, improves leadership, better employee engagement".

Is Feedback Really Needed

Depending on the situation, normal criticisms are usually taken as negative feedbacks, and usually what is taken as negative criticism is normally a constructive criticism. If taken well by the recipient, it could help the person to formulate better decisions to increase performances. To quote, "Criticism focuses almost entirely on the problem. It points out the problem (often many times) without suggesting a practical, workable solution. But a feedback focuses on recognizing the problem and then working with the recipient to come up with ways to resolve issues, correct problems, and move forward".

Benefits of Positive Feedbacks

A positive Feedback could improve various facets of employee engagement – improve loyalty, boost quality of work, improve communication, build up professional motivation within and boost professional collaboration. On the whole, the workplace and the working environment improve considerably Feedback is one of the seven principles for good teaching practice in undergraduate education described by Chickering and Gamson (1987). Later, Chickering and Gamson (1999) revised this principle to include assessment in addition to

prompt feedback. Feedback exchange of information involves both performance expected and performance exhibited.

Principles of Effective Online Teaching Practices

Distance Education or Online education has gathered much momentum ever since it was started about three decades ago. It has even much faster and higher enrolments than the regular systems of education that are being offered hitherto. It has been observed that in order to sustain its current trends, much more needs to be offered in contrast to regular systems, and institutions need to offer better and more flexible learning environments, and step up the quality of instruction's offered, to satisfy the requirements of the ever-growing distance-learning diasporas. Chickering & Gamson (1987) had while leading a task force, introduced seven cardinal principles of effective teaching for under graduates, which is also currently being followed for online teaching practices, quoting, they include,

1. "Encourage contact between students and faculty,
2. Develop reciprocity and cooperation among students,
3. Encourage active learning,
4. Give prompt feedback,
5. Emphasize time on task,
6. Communicate high expectations,
7. Respect diverse talents and ways of learning".

Though the above seven principles at that time were suggested for face to face, classroom teaching, are also now being adapted for online teaching, in various formats. Moore (2005) expects that the quality of education offered online should be better than that of those offered in the classroom (Face to Face). It was even suggested that the "Sloan- Cs five quality factors", could be applied to online teaching as well (Fig. 1)!



**Fig. 1 Five Pillars of Quality from Sloan-C
(Courtesy - Moore, 2005)**

Moore expects that the quality of education, namely, learning effectiveness, being offered online should be comparable to those offered by the traditional methods.

The Sloan-C five pillars of effective learning are:

- (a) Learning Effectiveness,
- (b) Cost Effectiveness and Institutional Commitment,
- (c) Access - Flexibility,
- (d) Faculty Satisfaction, and
- (e) Student Satisfaction.

Comparing both the seven requirements put forth by Chickering & Gamson (1999), and those, "Sloan C – Five" of Moore (2005), it becomes obvious that for the "Online learning experience" to be really effective, "*Faculty must be socially present in the learning environment; Students must form a learning community; and Students must be actively engaged in learning activities*".

Attrition Rates in Online Programs

Attrition rate is normally defined as the number of students who leave the program before completing it against the number registered in a program. "The U.S. News and World Report states that, the average retention

rate among first-time full-time students at online colleges is 55 percent and the average retention rate among first-time part-time students is 39 percent”. Though the online education is popular, many learners drop out. Every year the registered numbers of learners shows a large increase, but many fail to complete the courses. Reasons being attributed are several. Some of the reasons identified for the drop outs are indicated hereunder:

1. Unrealistic expectations about the work involved - some joiners join with the hope of taking it easy and later find that it is much beyond their control. Having paid the course, they hang on for some time and then drop out.
2. Lack of prerequisite experience – not all join with adequate knowledge of the course or program they have signed for. They expect that all the courses may start for beginners and in due course feel that they do not have a basic or fundamental knowledge of the course or program they have paid for. They then leave the program altogether.
3. Poor communication from the instructor - Online programs seem to be in isolation. They do not have eye contact with their teachers, and also do not get frequent feedbacks from their teachers, and hence feel that their progress is not noticed. In such cases, teachers should once in a while be in touch with their learners, before the learners feel frustrated and leave.
4. Bad pacing – some topics of a program are somewhat tougher. They do not get enough from the teacher in this regard. They should be able to learn courses in chunks which are easier to follow and later get into tougher portions. It is up to the teacher to get into discussions with such learners to help them overcome their understanding of such problems.
5. Unexpected course content or requirements - there are some learners eager to learn certain aspects of a subject. Initially they are not aware of the complete syllabi that are being taught. They feel upset if their particular field or subject is not up to their interests, they get depressed or totally upset because of their problem is not touched upon. The learner decides to quit.
6. Low motivation – learners lose interest, perhaps due to isolation, or their problems are not taught, or they are not noticed by the teacher, and they are ignored by their instructor, or perhaps the topic is too tough, or they are not able to adjust to the program because of overload of work elsewhere.
7. Technological glitches – technological problems could also perhaps lead to frustration, a Network failure or problem with the computer or the course delivery by the instructor is not up to expectations, or the course software, the learner leaves. This could perhaps be discussed online between the learner and the teacher to sort out the problem.

Much of these above mentioned reasons and others not cited here could be easily resolved if only the learner and the taught could get together, or discuss online, could perhaps solve the problem, and the learner could continue. On the other hand, if the problem revolves around financial or learner’s personal problems, then of course, nothing can be done.

Advantages of Online / Distance Learning

By understanding more about the advantages and disadvantages of online learning, you can get a better idea of whether it might be suitable for educational and career goals. For one who is committed to go in for a higher degree or perhaps seeking to be on a continuous learning program, an online program is the one best suited. However, the world over, online programs are in great demand.

Feedback is a very valuable and information tool, which helps to search for ways to make the best be even better. A performance appraisal, or a purposeful training evaluation method, or even a general survey could help the system to be on track. By obtaining or being given a feedback on performance, the giver feels that he is being heard, and the educator or trainer could avoid repeating mistakes and could improve his personal or professional growth. It should be the honest effort of everyone to encourage feedback. A feedback in the real term should never blame or judge, but point out specific cases or actions, leading to better employee engagement, create better working relationships and can motivate the learner and the educator. It promotes increased networking with course-mates, teachers etc, apart from improving time involved in appreciating a particular aspect of the program, by repeated and continuous access to course materials. It becomes a tool for continued learning and practices.

Deterrents for E-Learning

Though apparently it may seem that online courses are cheaper, for the online courses a Learner needs to have an access to a laptop or a computer, sometimes with necessary software, apart from the fees for the online courses. Further, internet costs could be recurring or fixed and depending on the time of usage. Network problems, down time, and all other problems are associated with it. In India, we are accustomed to the conventional face to face learning. However, with the advent of the technological changes, it takes some time for the Indian Diasporas to adapt to E-based learning methods; however with technological advances and with VR and AR coming in, has made the E-learning simpler.

II. Conclusion

Distance Education / Online Learning have grown rapidly over the past few decades, and online enrolments have been growing substantially faster than overall higher education enrolments. This phenomenal growth is mainly attributed to rapid digital transformations and considerably improved demand for lifelong learning! While e-Learning / Online Learning have all been in existence for the past few decades, and many HEIs (Higher Educational Institutions) have also been offering such programs, yet solutions are far, to decide bringing down the attrition rates of such programs. In the case of those learners who are interested in career advances and also an urge to keep learning, online programs is a boon. However, it must be noticed that whichever program is offered online is also the same as a regular program being offered in HEIs. Some of the HEIs have noticed that senior teachers are preferred to handle such programs, in view of the varying age spectrum of the online learners. Educators offering online Programs should offer a course which their learners will finish. It must also be the aim of the teachers offering the courses, to explore and understand why there are any dropouts from the courses they offer. Word of mouth prevails and a good word spoken about the courses offered does the marketing of the courses, as well! Feedback is important for the online educator because it creates an opportunity to develop an instructor-learner relationship, improve academic performance, and enhance learning. It has been observed that teacher-instructor competency is rated by better communication to the learner, grading visibility; prompt feedbacks, which help to enhance learning and providing the faculty to identify lean areas of teaching practices.

Universities in India have also started getting into the E-learning scenario, and hopefully by 2027, India should be very much in the ODL schemes of offering education on line. As of today, some of the Universities are offering online programmes, such as MBA, MCA, and Commerce. There is likely to be some amount of resistance that need to be removed, as these online of programmes do fall short of interaction with peers, group learning, feedbacks, and soft skill development and non availability of continuous internet facilities in the Tier 1 & 2 cities and far off villages of India.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to acknowledge the support rendered by Er. A.C.S. Arunkumar, President, Dr. M.G.R. Educational & Research Institute, Chennai, India

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