Colloquium

Learning from the online learners

Sanjaya Mishra

Sanjaya Mishra is Reader in Distance Education, Staff Training and Research Institute of Distance Education, Indira Gandhi National Open University, Maidan Garhi, New Delhi 110 068 India. Email: s-mishra@ignou.ac.in

Introduction

Mishra (2001) describes online learning as the new generation in the evolutionary growth of open, flexible, and distance learning. Bates (1991) remarked that it is a challenge for educators to harness the Internet effectively and provide a fulfilling educational experience to the learners. The key to promote improved learning with the web is to consider its effective exploitation in the teaching and learning situations. Mishra (2002) suggested an eclectic design framework for online learning environment to exploit the best of the three schools of thoughts in instructional design (eg, behaviourism, cognitive psychology, and constructivism) to match the technological capabilities of the web. The design framework has been used in developing the online learning environment for a six-month postgraduate certificate programme in Management of Displacement, Resettlement, and Rehabilitation (PGCMRR) offered at the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), India. This paper reports on the feedback study undertaken to learn from the experiences of the users of the online learning environment.

Methodology

Keegan (1990), taking a cue from control theory, recommends a research paradigm of close-loop system with negative feedback for improving distance education. Feedback is a form of evaluation through which people's judgment about a practice or/and innovation can be known. Calder (1994) has discussed four-course feedback models used in U.K. Open University, namely: (1) active feedback from groups; (2) passive feedback from individuals; (3) active routine feedback from individuals; and (4) active ad hoc feedback from individuals. The present study falls under the last category, and explores the learners' satisfaction and experiences of using the online learning environment.

The present study makes use of a self-report questionnaire that contained 24 statements about the online learning environment of PGCMRR with Likert-type 5-point scale (*Strongly agree* to *Strongly disagree*). "Self-report instruments allow participants to tell us about the program being evaluated, including how they used the program, what they felt about the experience, where they think the program can be improved, and their overall judgment of the program's worth" (Foshay & Quinn, 2004, p. 172).

The questionnaire was distributed to all the 113 online students of four batches from July 2001 to June 2003) of the PGCMMR programme. The questionnaire was distributed through email as well as through post (with self-addressed stamped return envelop). In total, only 16 responses were returned. Although the response rate was poor, the results were as significant for us as it would have been with a higher response rate; and therefore, detailed descriptive analysis was done. However, the results can only be considered indicative of the perceptions of a group of online learners who chose to share their views with the author of the paper. This study was performed to understand how the learners have used and experienced the learning design (Mishra, 2002; Mishra & Jain, 2002) of the online learning environment.

Results and discussion
Characteristics of the respondents
Of the 16 responses, 75% were male and only 25% were female. The average age of the respondents was 34.8 years. Sector-wise, they were from government (31.3%), non-governmental organisations (31.3%), consultancy (31.3%), and international organisations (6.3%). Most of the respondents were from the first batch (56.3%), as this group of 60 students actually completed their maximum allowed two-year period in June 2003. All components of the programme have been completed by 50% of the respondents, and from the rest, at least 50% were working on the project work. This is an indicator of the seriousness of the respondents and the usefulness of their views to the university. Majority of the respondents (87.5%) indicated that given an opportunity, they would like to join another online programme, and 56.3% said their expectations of joining the programme have been met.

Usage of the learning centre
Table 1 shows the various areas of the PGCMRR learning centre and their usage. It reflects that the learners used the Participation in Discussion Forum (PDF) area regularly followed by the Online Computer-Marked Assignments (OCMA) and the course units. It is interesting to note that 25% of the respondents said they never used the course units, which is actually the main part of the programme. Probably, these students indicate that they never used the online version of the course units, as these were also supplied to them through CDs.

Online learning experience
Table 2 indicates the disposition of the respondents towards 24 statements related to the online learning centre of the PGCMMR. The statistics reveal some interesting points:

- Fifty percent of the respondents agree/strongly agree that the announcement section provided updated information.
- Fifty percent of the respondents agree/strongly agree that the interactive self-assessment questions embedded in the course units helped to understand and evaluate their own progress.
- Seventy-five percent of the respondents thought the time given for OCMA was just right.

Table 1: Usage of the online learning centre

Facilities	Never[a]	Occasionally[a]	Regularly (Almost daily)[a]
Announcements	1 (6.3)	7 (43.8)	8 (50.0)
Course units	4 (25.0)	6 (37.5)	6 (37.5)
OCMA[b]	1 (6.3)	7 (43.8)	8 (50.0)
PDF[c]	1 (6.3)	4 (25.0)	11 (68.8)
Online diary	6 (37.5)	6 (37.5)	4 (25.5)
Library	8 (50.0)	5 (31.3)	3 (18.8)
Counselling/chat	6 (37.5)	10 (62.5)	—
Social chat	7 (43.8)	8 (50.0)	1 (6.3)
My profile	7 (43.8)	7 (43.8)	2 (12.5)

[a] Figures in parentheses indicate percentage.
[b] OCMA, online computer-marked assignments.
[c] PDF, participation in discussion forum.

- The PDF was appreciated most, and they thought it enhanced understanding of the subject (66.8%); it enabled creation of a community of practitioner (43.3%); and it allowed them to actively participate in discussing the course materials (62.5%).
- Only 31.3% of the respondents agree/strongly agree that online diary (OD) helped them; and also only 31.3% agreed that the real-time chat was useful to understand the subject.
- Only 25% agree that the online links in the library section were appropriate.
- A majority (68.8%) of the respondents agree/strongly agree that the social chat is good to reduce isolation of learners; and an equal percentage of the respondents disagree/strongly disagree to the statement that "the system made me feel isolated and lonely."
- Seventy-five percent of the respondents agree/strongly agree that the interface of the online learning centre was easy to use.
- A majority (68.8%) of the respondents indicated that the system allowed them to be self-directed and motivated.

The respondents were also asked to identify three sections each of the online learning centre they liked most and liked least. Table 3 indicates the top three in each group.

Whilst the reactions of the online learners corroborate most of the learning design of the PGCMRR online learning environment, the results require further elaboration. The PDF section, which is a peer-evaluated threaded discussion (asynchronous) board, has been well accepted by the group. It is probably because of the nature of the target group of the programme and the respondents, who are development workers, known for their ability to discuss issues emotionally and forcefully. At the same time, the synchronous sessions (e-counselling and social chat) did not receive much importance, as most of the development professionals are on tour in remote and difficult areas without access to computers and Internet. The respondents were satisfied with the role of the mentors

Table 2: Online learning experiences

Serial no.	Statements	Strongly agree[a]	Agree[a]	Neutral[a]	Disagree[a]	Strongly disagree[a]	Mean
1	The interface of the online learning center of the Programme (RROnline) was easy to use.	2 (12.5)	11 (68.6)	1 (6.3)	2 (12.5)	—	3.81
2	The objectives of the programme, courses, and lessons/units were clear.	8 (50.0)	6 (37.5)	1 (6.3)	1 (6.3)	—	4.31
3	The assessment methods were clear.	2 (12.5)	6 (37.5)	7 (43.8)	—	1 (6.3)	3.50
4	The level of the courses was too high.	1 (6.3)	4 (25.0)	4 (25.0)	5 (31.3)	2 (12.5)	2.81
5	There were too many materials to cover.	—	6 (37.5)	3 (18.8)	6 (37.5)	1 (6.3)	2.88
6	The duration of the programme is appropriate.	1 (6.3)	5 (31.3)	2 (12.5)	5 (31.3)	3 (18.8)	2.70
7	The overall quality of the programme is comparable to other face-to-face/distance education programme.	4 (25.0)	4 (25.0)	4 (25.0)	3 (18.8)	1 (6.3)	3.44
8	The "Announcement" section provided-up-to-date news about the university and the programme.	5 (31.3)	3 (18.8)	5 (31.3)	3 (18.8)	—	3.63
9	The interactive SAQs[b] embedded in the lessons helped in understanding and evaluating my progress.	4 (25.0)	4 (25.0)	5 (31.3)	3 (18.8)	—	3.56
10	The time for the OCMA[c] was just right.	2 (12.5)	11 (68.8)	2 (12.5)	1 (6.3)	1 (6.3)	3.88
11	The PDF[d] enhanced understanding of the subject.	5 (31.3)	6 (37.5)	3 (18.8)	1 (6.3)	1 (6.3)	3.81
12	The PDF[d] enabled to build a community of practitioners.	3 (18.8)	4 (25.0)	5 (31.3)	2 (12.5)	1 (6.3)	3.25
13	The "Diary" helped to track my activities in the programme.	1 (6.3)	4 (25.0)	7 (43.8)	4 (25.0)	—	3.13
14	The real-time chat facility was useful in understanding the subject.	—	5 (31.3)	6 (37.5)	3 (18.8)	2 (12.5)	2.88
15	The online links in the "Library" were appropriate.	—	4 (25.0)	7 (43.8)	5 (31.3)	—	2.94

Table 2: Continued

Serial no.	Statements	Strongly agree[a]	Agree[a]	Neutral[a]	Disagree[a]	Strongly disagree[a]	Mean
16	The facility to have social chat is good to reduce isolation of learners.	1 (6.3)	10 (62.5)	2 (12.5)	1 (6.3)	2 (12.5)	3.44
17	The mentor's support during the chat as well as the whole course was satisfactory.	2 (12.5)	7 (43.8)	4 (25.0)	2 (12.5)	1 (6.3)	3.44
18	The interactions amongst other learners were satisfactory.	1 (6.3)	2 (12.5)	7 (43.8)	4 (25.0)	2 (12.5)	2.75
19	The system worked properly most of the time.	—	8 (50.0)	4 (25.0)	3 (18.8)	1 (6.3)	3.19
20	The PDF allowed me to actively participate in discussing the course materials.	2 (12.5)	8 (50.0)	3 (18.8)	2 (12.5)	1 (6.3)	3.50
21	The system made me feel isolated and lonely.	2 (12.5)	—	1 (6.3)	9 (56.3)	4 (25.0)	2.19
22	The responses to email from the tutor/mentor/ programme coordinator were mostly within 48 hours.	6 (37.5)	4 (25.0)	3 (18.8)	1 (6.3)	2 (12.5)	3.69
23	The system allowed me to be self-directed and motivated.	4 (25.0)	7 (43.8)	2 (12.5)	2 (12.5)	1 (6.3)	3.69
24	The support provided to learn online was appropriate.	3 (18.8)	7 (43.8)	3 (18.8)	2 (12.5)	1 (6.3)	3.56

[a] Figures in parentheses indicate percentage.
[b] SAQ, self-assessment questions.
[c] OCMA, online computer-marked assignments.
[d] PDF, participation in discussion forum.

Table 3: Most and least preferred sections

Most liked sections[a]	Least liked sections[b]
PDF[b] (68.8)	Online diary (50.0)
Course units (56.3)	Social chat (37.5)
OCMA[c] (50.0)	e-Counselling/chat (31.3)

[a] Figures in the parentheses indicate percentage.
[b] PDF, participation in discussion forum.
[c] OCMA, online computer-marked assignments.

in the e-counselling sessions, but they were not satisfied with the interaction amongst other learners. It shows that there was much room for improvement in the organisation of the synchronous sessions. The online diary was introduced as a means to help the online learners to track their own activities for the project work vis-à-vis learning. But, this has also been rejected by most of the learners. One respondent clearly emphasised, "Don't use diary. It is difficult to maintain." The online diary is in fact a rudimentary form of "online blog," and the respondents thought it is difficult to maintain as they were supposed to log in daily for this task. Similarly, the library section also received suggestion to "include more documents."

The respondents also provided some specific suggestions, for example:

Provide better and detailed help on technical matter.
Project work should also be done online.
Time duration to submit the PDF should be increased.
The course material should be upgraded.

Conclusion

The PGCMMR online programme is offered for six cycles, and the IGNOU is now planning to launch an upgraded diploma programme soon. The programme is now also available in offline mode for the benefit of those having no access to the Internet. The above learning gains from the feedback of the online learners would be useful for further improvement of the quality of online learning environment. It is also expected that other social sciences online programmes will also benefit from the "eclectic" instructional design framework and the reactions of the learners to its web implementation.

References

Bates, A. W. (1991). Third generation distance education: the challenge of new technology. *Research in Distance Education 2*, 10–15.

Calder, J. (1994). Course feedback: its costs and benefits, its limitations and potential. In G. Dhanrajan, P. K. Ip, K. S. Yuen & C. Swales (Eds), *Economics of distance education: recent experiences* (241–255). Hong Kong: OLI.

Foshay, W. R. & Quinn, D. W. (2004). Strategies for evaluating technology in education and training. In M. Mukhopadhyay (Ed.), *Educational technology: knowledge assessment* (pp. 154–179). New Delhi: Shipra.

Keegan, D. (1990). *Foundation of distance education*. London: Routledge.

Mishra, S. (2001). Designing online learning. *COL Knowledge Series, Vancouver: The Commonwealth of Learning*. Retrieved May 19, 2004, from http://www.col.org/Knowledge/ks_online.htm.

Mishra, S. (2002). A design framework for online learning environment. *British Journal of Educational Technology 33*, 493–496.

Mishra, S. & Jain, S. (2002). *Designing an online learning environment for Participatory Management of Displacement, Resettlement and Rehabilitation*. Paper presented at the 2nd Pan-Commonwealth Conference on Open Learning held at Durban, South Africa from 28 July to 3 August 2002. Retrieved May 19, 2004, from http://www.col.org/pcf2/papers/mishra.pdf.