STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES IN DISTANCE LEARNING SYSTEMS

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Abstract

This paper is about student support services in distance learning systems in India. At first a traditional view on the topic of education is given. Then mass education and their specific problems are discussed. The difference between the traditional and the mass education under the view of student support and distance learning is described and discussed. In the main part of this paper two e-learning systems are described and their student support is discussed. At the end of this paper a small conclusion discussing the two systems and the situation in e-learning platforms today in general.

Introduction

In the early days of higher education the number of students was manageable and the teacher could teach all of them in one class. With the growing number of students and new technical developing the situation changed. The Open Distance Learning system in India, being one of the largest educational systems in the world, serves to the needs of millions of students. Presently, it comprises of 14 open universities and about 200 ODL Institutions in the country, offering distance education to about 5 million students. In the successful ODL institutions of the world, learning is taking place through the various web based educational models that can provide distance education through flexible delivery methods. The web based education can help a large

student population to learn easily and successfully without commensurate increase in staffing costs. Thus, with a view to provide quality education to the distance learners, it is suggested to design an updated web system for Student Support Services in the ODL institutions The way of traditional education became expanded to manage more and more students. To do so, distance learning was developed and in time, more and more improved, by using new technologies. However, it is found that in most of the ODLIs in India such a web system either does not exist at all or does not cover all the major features required for providing proper Student Support Services. An appropriate web-based Student Support System is thus crucial to be established in ODL Institutions of our country.

The present paper proposes an updated web-system focussing the major categories of services to be provided for Student Support Services in ODL institutions. All the major features of student services which are necessary for updating the web-system have been included. However, the proposed web system may not be a replacement for the existing Student Support Services rather it would complement to the existing services.

Traditional system of education

Now we take a look at the beginning of distance learning systems. Let us start with the traditional Higher Education. Here the teacher was responsible for just a small group of students. In that typical frame it was possible for the teacher, to take care, about all learning issues from their students. The relationship between students and the teacher was usually very personal and very individually. The teacher took care about the support of the students with them together and personal.

Growing numbers of students

The growing number of students in the last decades brought a change in the field of education. The teachers and tutors became responsible of more and more students and the question, how to teach such a large number of students, became more and more important. In this mass education the face to face relationship changed to a depersonalization process. The dialog became a monologue, and the teacher was active and the audience wholly passive. So the students had no longer a very close relationship with a tutor or teacher and hence with the institution. They saw themselves, and were seen, as similar if not identical parts on a production line. But the wish of the students for support was already there.

Student support

To provide the students with self learning material and other educational stuff, the traditional way in higher education was very bureaucratic. It was necessary to go to the 'support area', which was for example, the institute, the library or the lecture-room. There the students could satisfy their educational needs. But in the beginning of the twenty first century a lot of things changed. The usage of new technologies like computers and the internet, to manage the student support, generates a whole new field of education.

Distance learning

With the medial preparation of the learning content, it was possible to give the lecture material (paper, radio talks, videocassettes, television, etc.) to the students. Now the student was free to learn at their own place and convenience while being away from their university. At the beginning of distance education the material was given to the student personally or sent via the post, radio or sometimes via television. But all this was just a one-way communication between teacher and student. Nowadays the common way to make distance learning is computer-based, combined with the internet. The benefit of the new technologies (email, chat, weblogs, etc) provides again, like in the traditional times, the two-way communication. It is clear that this has more benefits than the one-way communication. But now the question was which internet technology is the best for distance learning.

Student support services in distance learning systems

The main topic was now to allocate support for the students and create a good learning method, or better a good learning platform. On the way of good solutions a lot of mistakes happened, because the most developer forgot one of the main points here. It was important to focus also on the didactic aspects of education. This means, a software developer has a different view on creating software than a teacher, which wants to present their lecture content in a didactical and educational way. The systems here described had their times of didactical mistakes but today they are working well.

Main concept

The main aim of distance education and support systems for students was, to promote self study or independent study among distance learners in the absence of regular face-to-face teaching. To achieve this, every distance learning system extends support to their learners, which comprises of a cluster of facilities and activities that are intended to make the teaching-learning process easier and more interesting for the learners. All these activities beyond the production

and delivery of self learning material assist in the progress of students in terms of learning, interacting and effective communication and, therefore, the support system may range from study centre counseling/tutorial support to administrative problem solving. The success or failure of a student support system can be judged on a number of performance indicators.

1) Develop under respect of didactic manners 2) Make sure to make the Human Computer Interface easy to understand (usability) 3) Every person which has to, or want to use the system must have the technical requirements to do so 4) Motivation of the students is very important to complete online courses. Also two major sub-systems can be generally identified to make distance learning more effective and ensure the desired level of quality.

1) Course Production   2) Student Support Services

When we speak from Course Production, it's important to say, that the distance education tools on the market can manage a big amount of courses. Where everyone has its own space or "virtual room" in the system. To fill these rooms with content is the main point of course production. Student Support Systems means the interaction and communication with the tutor of a course and the support the students can get from the possibilities which are offered. To make such systems work it's necessary to give different roles with different responsibilities to manage all the courses, content, students and so on. Three roles minimum can be indentified

1) Administrator 2) Tutor (courses) 3) Students

The administrator is the person which is responsible for the technical aspects of the system. To install it and make sure, that all works, like it should. Also the administrator is able to create tutors for courses. The tutor (teacher) manages courses and fills the space (room), which is provided from the system with their own content for learning and teaching. In good systems the tutor can manage a lot of things, like which students can see (enter, login or access) the course-material, or manage organizational things.   The students are the consumer of the content. Important here is, that the content has a good quality. This is one of the key-points of a successful e-learning platform.

Moodle

"Moodle" is the abbreviation for "modular object oriented dynamic learning environment" and basically a course management system. It was developed 2001-2003 by

Martin Dougiamas. It makes very cost-saving and useful for universities. "moodle" is organised as a software-package with a lot of services. The most important feature is the support of online learning without a directive, how the content has to look like. It depends just on the teacher, how he prepares the lecture-material and how much he wants to use from the modules. For example a multiple – choice-test can created and during the test automatically a feedback to each (wrong or right) answer can be generated. The tutor, who creates the course, is responsible for that. They are able to gets all information about the doing of their students and can communicate with them via different ways (forum, chat, email). It depends on the tutor, how good the support for the student is, because there are enough ways to communicate. Also the student is able to question via this ways, whenever he/she like. Generally, one of the most important things in such courses is, to supervise them and help the students where it's necessary.

Conclusion

The field of online-platforms for e-learning is very big and nearly unmanageable. Because of this fact, this paper can't give some advice, what services are good or bad, or which system is better. It always depends on the usage of the system. But what it can show is the fact, that well proven and successful systems need a student support service to function. Important is that the students became not the feeling, to be just a number in a row, doing work like a robot and succeed or fail and then that's it. Learning is more than just work. It's also an important social process.

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