



AN ANALYSIS OF TEACHERS' PERCEPTION OF E-LEARNING FOR ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS

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Abstract

Continuing professional development is crucial for every job and all the more so, for complex roles such as that of a teacher. The present scenario of our pre-service teacher-education is such that it leaves new teachers largely unprepared to play their roles, and they find themselves unable to cope with their situation, leading to poor educational outcomes for students. Consequently, a vicious spiral begins at the very beginning of the teacher's career, demoralising her and sometimes leading to a situation of indifference and lack of interest in the profession. Given the prevailing situation, there is a need to look at various aspects related to the professional development of teachers. This paper is an attempt to explore and explain the utility of e-learning for ongoing professional development of teachers from the perspective of teachers themselves, based on their responses to semi-structured interviews about the feasibility of online courses for this purpose.

Keywords: Teacher education through e-learning, Ongoing professional development, Teachers' perception about e-learning.



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Introduction

Continuing professional development is crucial for any job and more so for jobs that entail complex roles such as that of a teacher. The scene of pre-service teacher-education in our country leaves much to be desired for. New teachers are largely unprepared to suitably play their roles. This leads to poor educational outcomes for students and to a stage where teachers find themselves in a state of disinterest and indifference towards their profession because of the demoralising effects of such outcomes. Quite a few attempts have been made to improve the conditions of Pre-service and In-service teacher-education, some of them being

successful, while others were not. The overall condition of teacher-education is not satisfactory and this is evident from the unsatisfactory learning-outcome of the students as reflected in the Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER) down the years. Therefore, the urgent need for improvements in Continuing Teacher-Education for the professional development of teachers is evidently clear. But the question is how to go about it?

In recent years, one direct fall-out of technological advancements has been the displacement of physical resources. Instead, the newer digital learning space has come to stay, changing in its wake the traditional methods of teaching-learning which had remained more or less the same for decades if not centuries. Teacher Education has not remained untouched by this trend. There are a lot of online courses now, which are termed as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) in popular parlance, which facilitate ongoing professional development of teachers by way of courses designed for this purpose. But MOOCs are not the only component of e-learning. A discussion on its meaning, form and features follows in the next section..

Meaning, Forms and Features of e-learning

E-Learning is about making use of technology to learn, upgrade knowledge and skills on an anytime, anywhere basis without going for regular courses to physical class-rooms. The computer and other such gadgets with an internet connection become the point of ignition in this process of learning. In concrete terms, one comes face-to-face with devices as varied as the computer, the laptop, smart phones, tablets and electronic notebooks – these become the substitute of the blackboard and other tools of the traditional methods of instruction to be used by the students and teachers. The classroom-cum-blackboard based lecture-method of instruction is replaced by an online “interaction” with lessons being taught, for instance, not by a human being in flesh and blood but an online distance learning mode with, in some cases, the “teacher as speaker in video” visible on-screen. Lessons and assignments may also be shared online in this mode of teaching-learning.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest etc. are popular media for informal e-learning. For the formal aspects of e-learning, MOOCs are gaining popularity as these offer some unprecedented facilities - for instance, these are open-access, most of them are free of cost and also free from the limitations of time and place as these can be accessed on an anytime, anywhere basis. Some of these courses offer a wonderfully enriching experience in the form of a virtual classroom which may also be a flipped classroom in which roles of teachers and students are reversed in such a way that students (who are, otherwise,

teachers too) lead the discourse rather than the teacher being the anchor of classroom interaction. Flipped classroom is actually quite common in online courses. In synchronous online courses, peer-learning/collaborative learning is also possible because of their requirement of all the learners being online *at the same time*. Asynchronous courses do not provide opportunities for peer-learning because all the learners and teachers are *not* required to be online at the same time but these courses offer tremendous liberty to the learner in terms of time and place.

As has been pointed out by the author in one of her previous papers, “India is considered to be the biggest market for MOOCs in the world after the USA. Since the population of India is huge, massive open online course (MOOC) are said to be gateways for a lot of Indians in terms of bringing an educational revolution.” (Rani, K., 2015) They may be seen as an extension of existing online learning.

Quite obviously, these new, digitalized modes of instruction are seen to have many advantages, given the possibilities inherent in terms of scalability, the number of students covered simultaneously in real-time online interaction, and online submission of assignments on a regular basis. It has to be seen, however, as to how much of feasibility they have in terms of their acceptance and objective conditions on the ground. An attempt to understand teachers’ perspective on the feasibility and utility of e-learning was made and the following responses were registered on the basis of a semi-structured interview of 45 randomly selected teachers of Haryana:

➤ Do you think e-learning is helpful for ongoing professional development?

In response to the question as to whether e-learning is helpful for ongoing professional development, the responses were not very robust- less than half of the respondents responded in a positive vein about this. Most of the teachers believed that e-learning cannot be successful because its very design is casual and any real learning commands seriousness and discipline which is not in-built in the design of e-learning. The traditional form of learning brings a discipline among people which is crucial for updating knowledge and learning new skills.

➤ How useful is e-learning for the skill-development of teachers?

Skill-development, as majority of the teachers opined, was a matter of a lot of practice and hands-on experience which was not possible in e-learning. Moreover, in e-learning, learning from observing others was not possible in most of the cases. Peer-learning may be a component of the theory of MOOCs, but in practice, there are lots of hindrances, such as the

requirement of high-speed internet connectivity for live-streaming of videos in online learning. In the absence of this facility, e-learning becomes a dull, lifeless process in which it becomes really difficult to develop new teaching skills.

➤ How feasible is e-learning in India?

With regard to the feasibility of e-learning, a huge majority of respondent-teachers believed that e-learning doesn't hold great potential due to lack of basic amenities such as electricity, internet connection etc. without which digital learning is impossible. Moreover, digital literacy is not so common among people as of now and more so in the older generation of teachers.

➤ How credible are e-courses among employers?

A great majority of teachers said that if one is able to complete e-courses against all odds, one faces credibility issues also when it comes to gaining points for professional growth. Due to the lack of serious Evaluation and Certification methodologies of online courses, online courses have not been able to gain the same credibility amongst employers as the traditional courses enjoy. The utility in scaling the ladder of professional growth as an outcome of e-learning cannot be ignored if digital education is to be popularized among teachers.

➤ What are the main problems of e-learning?

The most common response was that though e-learning was helpful, it cannot replace the traditional form of learning for various reasons - it requires the learners to be tech-savvy, which is not so common among senior teachers and not universal among the younger generation as well. Time-management while staying at home was identified as another major hindrance in pursuing e-courses. If e-courses are not interesting enough, and if the fear of monetary loss and any external compulsion be not there, one may be tempted to quit before completion.

One more important point was about social-media platforms as sources of e-learning and yet being problematic in some ways - You Tube and Facebook, for instance, are otherwise great platforms in this context but issues crop up in due course. They are initially accessed in the hope of reaching useful resources to learn something from – say, audio-video teaching-learning materials or articles, links and conversation-threads around issues of education. But often if not always, one ends up wasting a lot of time, being unable to resist the temptation of viewing the popular entertainment stuff more than the resources that were initially intended to be reached.

Conclusion: From the popular opinion as gathered through this interaction with randomly selected teachers, it may be concluded that e-learning is yet to gain popularity and credibility as doubts about its utility, feasibility and credibility persist among most of the respondents. The casual nature of e-learning that lacks discipline which is essential for any real learning to take place was identified by the respondent-teachers as the major problem in this avenue of learning. There may be a great possibility of wastage of time because of so many distractions being present in online learning. It also lacks practice or the component of hands-on experience other than its requirement of digital literacy which is not all- pervasive as of now. To add to this, it also requires access to a high-speed internet-connection and sophisticated gadgets – and the credibility of e-courses among employers is not at par with traditional courses. All these factors coming together make e-learning a not-so-popular medium for the ongoing professional growth of teachers. But it can be hoped that when these issues and concerns are taken care of, e-learning can become a potentially useful and well-liked medium of learning for teachers.

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