Sociological Perspectives of Online Education and Its Implications

SRINIVASA MURTHY A T

Assistant Professor of Sociology

LBS Government First Grade College R T Nagar Bangalore-560032

Abstract

According to the functional perspective, education helps socialize children and prepare them for their eventual entrance into the larger society as adults. The conflict perspective emphasizes that education reinforces inequality in the larger society. The symbolic interactionist perspective focuses on social interaction in the classroom, on school playgrounds, and at other school-related venues. Social interaction contributes to gender-role socialization, and teachers' expectations may affect their students' performance. Online education has gained immense popularity among working professionals and students pursuing higher education. These categories of online learners find immense benefit in the autonomy and flexibility that these courses offer

The COVID-19 has resulted in educational institutions shut all across the world. Globally, over 1.2 billion children are out of the classroom. As a result, education has changed dramatically, with the distinctive rise of e learning, whereby teaching is undertaken remotely and on digital platforms. Within a short span of the COVID-19 pandemic, many researchers have shared their works on teaching and learning in different ways. Several schools, colleges and universities have discontinued face-to-face teachings. This article aims to provide a comprehensive report on Sociological Perspectives of Online Education and Its Implications.

KEYWORDS: Sociological Perspectives, Online Education, Digital Learning

Introduction

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."-Nelson Mandela

Education is no exception. Students from privileged backgrounds, supported by their parents and eager and able to learn, could find their way past closed school doors to alternative learning opportunities. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds often remained shut out when their schools shut down. This crisis has exposed the many inadequacies and inequities in our education systems – from access to the broadband and computers needed for online education, and the supportive environments needed to focus on learning, up to the misalignment between resources and needs. The lockdowns in response to COVID-19 have interrupted conventional schooling with nationwide schools and colleges. While the educational community have made concerted efforts to maintain learning continuity during this period, children and students have had to rely more on their own resources to continue learning remotely through the Internet, television or radio. Teachers also had to adapt to new pedagogical concepts and modes of delivery of teaching, for which they may not have been trained. In particular, learners in the most marginalized groups, who don't have access to digital learning resources or lack the resilience and engagement to learn on their own, are at risk of falling behind.

Objectives of the study

1. To understand the concept of online education
2. Investigate the effectiveness of e-learning /online education
3. To determine the Implications of online learning/education

Review of Literature

E-learning tools have played a crucial role during this pandemic, helping schools and universities facilitate student learning during the closure of universities and schools (**Subedi et al., 2020**).

Levin (1995) through his research into the educational use of electronic networks has found that there are a number of similar guidelines for conducting networked-based educational activities. He presents five general features found during his research. Structure, a social structure is important for supporting network interactions. The social structure maybe very different to the parallel in a face-to-face situation and is determined in part by the goals and constraints of the participants, and partly by the network itself. Process, network activity is episodic with an initiation phase, activity phase and a wrap-up phase.

Van Vliet & Burgess in Fernback and Thomspon (1995) are cited as stating that communities contain the following elements: social interaction, a shared value system, and a shared symbol system. These three elements underlie much of the research into on-line learning communities

What is online education?

"Online education is electronically supported learning that relies on the Internet for teacher/student interaction and the distribution of class materials."

Computer-based training, Web-based training, Internet based training, online training, e-learning (electronic learning), m-learning (mobile learning), computer-aided distance education - online education goes by many names and comes in a variety of styles, but at its core:

Online learning is a method of education whereby students learn in a virtual environment. First introduced in the 1990s with the creation of the internet and utilized in distance learning, online learning (also called e-learning) is most prevalent in higher education, enabling students from different geographical areas to engage with an academic institution and other students online and learn flexibly, at their own pace, while working towards a degree or certificate.

Online learning refers to an internet-based learning environment that can connect students of diverse backgrounds who boast different perspectives. A higher education institution will use a learning management system, or LMS, to facilitate online learning, which can take the form of asynchronous learning (where students are not required to be online at the same time, and utilize discussion threads and e-mails to complete coursework) or synchronous learning (where students must be online at the same time).

Societal Impacts and Effects of Online Education

The challenges of online learning

There are, however, challenges to overcome. Some students without reliable internet access and/or technology struggle to participate in digital learning.

In the US, there is a significant gap between those from privileged and disadvantaged backgrounds: whilst virtually all 15-year-olds from a privileged background said they had a computer to work on, nearly 25% of those from disadvantaged backgrounds did not. While some schools and governments have been providing digital equipment to students in need, such as in New South Wales, Australia, many are still concerned that the pandemic will widen the digital divide.

Is learning online as effective?

For those who do have access to the right technology, there is evidence that learning online can be more effective in a number of ways. Some research shows that on average, students retain 25-60% more material when learning online compared to only 8-10% in a classroom. This is mostly due to the students being able to learn faster online; e-learning requires 40-60% less time to learn than in a traditional classroom setting because students can learn at their own pace, going back and re-reading, skipping, or accelerating through concepts as they choose.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of online learning varies amongst age groups. The consensus on children, especially younger ones, is that a structured environment is required, because kids are more easily distracted. To get the full benefit of online learning, there needs to be a concerted effort to provide this structure and go beyond replicating a physical class/lecture through video capabilities, instead, using a range of collaboration tools and

engagement methods that promote "inclusion, personalization and intelligence", according to Dowson Tong, Senior Executive Vice President of Tencent and President of its Cloud and Smart Industries Group.

Since studies have shown that children extensively use their senses to learn, making learning fun and effective through use of technology is crucial, according to BYJU's Mrinal Mohit. "Over a period, we have observed that clever integration of games has demonstrated higher engagement and increased motivation towards learning especially among younger students, making them truly fall in love with learning", he says.

A changing education imperative

It is clear that this pandemic has utterly disrupted an education system that many assert was already losing its relevance. In his book, 21 Lessons for the 21st Century, scholar Yuval Noah Harari outlines how schools continue to focus on traditional academic skills and rote learning, rather than on skills such as critical thinking and adaptability, which will be more important for success in the future. Could the move to online learning be the catalyst to create a new, more effective method of educating students? While some worry that the hasty nature of the transition online may have hindered this goal, others plan to make e-learning part of their 'new normal' after experiencing the benefits first-hand.

The importance of disseminating knowledge is highlighted through COVID-19

Major world events are often an inflection point for rapid innovation – a clear example is the rise of e-commerce post-SARS. While we have yet to see whether this will apply to e-learning post-COVID-19, it is one of the few sectors where investment has not dried up. What has been made clear through this pandemic is the importance of disseminating knowledge across borders, companies, and all parts of society. If online learning technology can play a role here, it is incumbent upon all of us to explore its full potential.

Effectiveness of E-Learning /Online Education

- **Broadening access** in ways that dramatically reduce the cost of providing access to quality educational resources and experiences, particularly for students in remote locations or other situations where challenges such as low student enrollments make the traditional school model impractical;

- **Engaging students in active learning** with instructional materials and access to a wealth of resources that can facilitate the adoption of research-based principles and best practices from the learning sciences, an application that might improve student outcomes without substantially increasing costs;

- **Individualizing and differentiating instruction** based on student performance on diagnostic assessments and preferred pace of learning, thereby improving the efficiency with which students move through a learning progression;

- **Personalizing learning by building on student interests**, which can result in increased student motivation, time on task and ultimately better learning outcomes;

- **Making better use of teacher and student time** by automating routine tasks and enabling teacher time to focus on high-value activities;

- **Increasing the rate of student learning** by increasing motivation and helping students grasp concepts and demonstrate competency more efficiently;

- **Reducing school-based facilities costs** by leveraging home and community spaces in addition to traditional school buildings; 8) Reducing salary costs by transferring some educational activities to computers, by increasing teacher-student ratios or by otherwise redesigning processes that allow for more effective use of teacher time;

Positive Aspects of Online Learning/Education

Accessibility of Time and Place-Another advantage of online education is that it allows students to attend classes from any location of their choice. It also allows schools to reach out to a more extensive network of students, instead of being restricted by geographical boundaries. Additionally, online lectures can be recorded, archived, and shared for future reference. This allows students to access the learning material at a time of their comfort**.**

Efficiency-Online learning offers teachers an efficient way to deliver lessons to students. Online learning has a number of tools such as videos, PDFs, podcasts, and teachers can use all these tools as part of their lesson plans. By extending the lesson plan beyond traditional textbooks to include online resources, teachers are able to become educators that are more efficient.

Affordability& Convenience-Another advantage of online learning is reduced financial costs. Online education is far more affordable as compared to physical learning. This is because online learning eliminates the cost points of student transportation, student meals, and most importantly, real estate. Additionally, all the course or study materials are available online, thus creating a paperless learning environment, which is more affordable, while also being beneficial to the environment.

Improved Student Attendance -Since online classes can be taken from home or location of choice, there are fewer chances of students missing lessons.

Suits a Variety of Learning Styles-Every student has a different learning journey and a different learning style. Some students are visual learners, while some students prefer to learn through audio. Similarly, some students thrive in the classroom, and other students are solo learners who get distracted by large groups.

Creativity and Flexibility-Online learning is popular among working adults because they often cannot take traditional classes, especially with kids at home. Working students usually have better success with Internet education; students prefer to work independently with a combination of auditory, visual and hands-on activities. They also need the ability to schedule reading, schoolwork and tests around work and family responsibilities. You can also complete schooling from the comforts of home, eliminating the need to commute to campus

Grade Monitoring-Online students typically have a greater capacity to monitor class performance and to check on assignment instructions. Professors in traditional classes may provide grade reports periodically or after tests. Online students usually have open access to their grades, which appear as professors enter them online. This provides many opportunities for students to ask questions and express concerns about assignments grades. Additionally, students who misunderstand or do not attend a traditional class to get project instructions are normally out of luck. In online learning, students have access to class files and materials from the time they are provided to the deadline in most cases.

Societal Impacts and Effects of Online Education

Inability To Focus On Screens - For many students, one of the biggest challenges of online learning is the struggle with focusing on the screen for long periods. With online learning, there is also a greater chance for students to be easily distracted by social media or other sites. Therefore, it is imperative for the teachers to keep their online classes crisp, engaging, and interactive to help students stay focused on the lesson.

Technology Issues- Another key challenge of online classes is internet connectivity. While internet penetration has grown in leaps and bounds over the past few years, in smaller cities and towns, a consistent connection with decent speed is a problem. Without a consistent internet connection for students or teachers, there can be a lack of continuity in learning for the child. This is detrimental to the education process.

Sense of Isolation- Students can learn a lot from being in the company of their peers. However, in an online class, there are minimal physical interactions between students and teachers. This often results in a sense of isolation for the students. In this situation, it is imperative that the school allow for other forms of communication between the students, peers, and teachers. This can include online messages, emails and video conferencing that will allow for face-to-face interaction and reduce the sense of isolation.

Lack of Teacher Training - Online learning requires teachers to have a basic understanding of using digital forms of learning. However, this is not the case always. Very often, teachers have a very basic understanding of technology. Sometimes, they don't even have the necessary resources and tools to conducts online classes.

Less Direct Contact- Online classes don't offer the same immediate and regular access to instructors and classmates as traditional face-to-face classes. The communication typically takes place through e-mail and in virtual discussion forums. While this can aid in learning technology, it negatively impacts a student's ability to interact with professors, ask questions and get immediate help. It also takes away from some of the social and team-building that occurs informally in college classrooms.

Less Accountability- Online students cannot rely on as much instructor and peer feedback and accountability as traditional courses sometimes offer. Instructors often update grades through virtual grade books and do not have as much opportunity for regular informal feedback before and after classes. Additionally, students do not have regular contact with class peers, who can offer assignment reminders and encouragement to complete projects and assignments. This also applies to team activities since you do not have direct interaction with teammates pushing you to complete your responsibilities.

Higher Dropout Rate- Tangibly, the most negative effect of online classes is a higher rate of class failure and dropouts. A study revealed in July 2011 by the Columbia University Community College Research Center indicated that Washington community college students were more likely to drop online classes than traditional ones. Course completion for traditional courses was 90 percent, and for online classes, it was 82 percent. Additionally, students in the study who took online courses were less likely to complete a degree or transfer to another college. Students studied in 2004 who took at least one fall online class were 34 percent likely to drop out after one year compared to 26 percent who only took face-to-face classes.

Limited Social Interaction-A common disadvantage of online education is limited social interaction. While online students often engage peers in online discussions and interact with teachers via e-mail, this does not replicate the face-to-face experiences in a traditional classroom. The informal social interactions with peers before and after classes helps instill a sense of community and belonging. You also have more direct connections with teachers and can ask questions during class to expand insights on a topic. Many classes also use student work groups to develop teamwork skills.

Lack of Structure-Self-disciplined students can benefit from the flexibility and convenience of online classes, but the lack of formal structure can be a pitfall for undisciplined or unmotivated students. You don't have a standard meeting time and you don't have regular, direct interaction with teachers and peers who can remind you of assignments and push you to work harder. Online students who lack self-discipline can fall behind on assignments, fail to study adequately by test deadlines and ultimately suffer because of a lack of initiative in engaging instructors via e-mail or phone.

Limited Collaborative Learning-Limited opportunities to learn from the experiences and backgrounds of class peers is a major negative of online learning, according to the Illinois Online Network website. In classrooms, students can share ideas, listen to peers and collaborate face-to-face on projects. Online classes normally use virtual discussion forums, but benefits of this format are limited in classes of 20 to 25. It is difficult to be deeply engaged in conversations with other students that lead to new ways of thinking and broader cultural and diversity awareness.

Increased Time and Effort-Ironically, successful online learning normally requires that students commit more time and effort than they would in a traditional class, according to Montgomery College. Students typically complete readings and video assignments to make up for in-class learning. They also get assignment instructions and submit their work through the Web. The part that often takes more time is regular communication with other students and professors via e-mail and through discussion forums. Thus, students need to effectively schedule quiet time for study and work.

Time Management-Both online and traditional classes require students to manage their time wisely. In traditional classes, students structure their time outside of the classroom to allow for studying, projects and homework. However, Northcentral University, an online institution, states that with the absence of regular class meetings, online courses require students to acquire and learn course materials on their own time. According to the "Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks," this freedom is what makes online classes attractive to nontraditional students who may work additional jobs or have family responsibilities that make attending regular classes a challenge.

Participation-Both online and classroom-based courses also assess student participation. In traditional classes, students voluntarily participate in discussions or ask and answer questions. However, according to the University of Connecticut's Instructional Design and Development Guide for Online Students, some people may be shy or unwilling to contribute, leading to a lopsided class dynamic where the same people tend to carry the weight. In online courses, participation is mandatory, usually through written discussions in chat rooms or on

message boards. Students, therefore, have the opportunity to hear a wider range of perspectives, including those of people who may struggle with participating in a traditional environment.

Student and Teacher Relationships-In a classroom-based course, face-to-face communication creates a different dynamic for every class. Online classes, however, lack this interaction, requiring teachers to use forums, chats and other online discussion media to build community. The University of Connecticut's Instructional Design and Development Guide for Online Students also states that in terms of group assignments, being unable to delegate work in person can add complications. Similarly, students also lack the opportunity to get to know the instructor in-person. While traditional classrooms let students gain support and personal relationships from teachers, online courses only offer electronic communication.

More Expensive-Private schools do not receive public funding from the state as do public universities. As a result, private university tuition can be twice as much or more than at a public university, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Campus housing may be limited or nonexistent, increasing the costs of attendance further. Private schools offset those costs by offering generous financial aid packages and scholarships that aren't tied to financial need.

Lack a sense of community feeling & Peer Interaction -Your interaction with peers is greatly reduced in an online learning community. For the most part, student's complete online classes alone, asynchronously, and any peer interaction happens on discussion boards and in chat rooms. Often, online classrooms can lack a sense of community and lead to a feeling of isolation. They also reduce the opportunity to network with others, which can be a disadvantage as students finish school and begin to look for new work opportunities.

Conclusion

`   Learning online is different from learning in a face-to-face setting, and it is important to think about your goals, your needs and your interests before committing yourself to something. You also need to think about the time you have available, your comfort level with using technology and the equipment that is at your disposal. As we, all become more familiar with computers and computer access becomes increasingly common, online learning will continue to open doors and offer learning opportunities for those who are interested

Online education is an increasingly large part of higher education, as both online schools and traditional schools continue to expand their online offerings. Online learning communities have made access to higher education easier for students that work full time, have disabilities or otherwise cannot make it to traditional classes. However, there are disadvantages to online learning communities due to factors such as a lack of personal contact and an increased need for time management skills. To reduce all the negative affects to give proper training to teachers and students and enhancing good technological infrastructure in the country.

Online learning is a growing and exciting new way to learn about almost anything. If there is a course, you have always wanted to take, a skill you have always wanted to learn, but you have not had the time to attend a traditional face-to-face class, or there has not been an opportunity near you, then online learning might be your answer. Today's online learning opportunities offer everything from one-hour live workshops to online degrees. There is virtually something for everyone; all you have to do is find it.

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