BLENDED LEARNING IN NEP - CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract: Covid 19 has created more uncertainties, disruption, and agony in human life. Yes, all of us have witnessed this and most of us have experienced it. However, we have also witnessed the emergence of **new normal**. Which is a more popular word used during this pandemic. This new normal has hit many fields associated to us. Important among these, is education. The dimension of learning is believed to be taking new shape, or rather multiple facets. The objective of this paper is to understand the challenges and the opportunities available to blended learning. Its quite an interesting subject, we should deep dive and understand, because the learning mode for our future generation is going to have drastic changes. Developments due to this is incremental, but should not have paradigm shift.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial, there is a constant change to learning process in India. From Gurukula's where students used to stay isolated from their home and family members to seek education along with life skills, under the close monitoring of a dedicated guru. Here the guru used to be a mentor, he supposed to be the reason behind all the accomplishments of his students. Education used to happen in a remote place, where focused approach, without any distractions was ensured, their contact with the family members was very limited. Life during this period was very simple and dedicated to only for learning. This was same for students as well as guru's. Hence, more importance was given to teacher – student relationship.
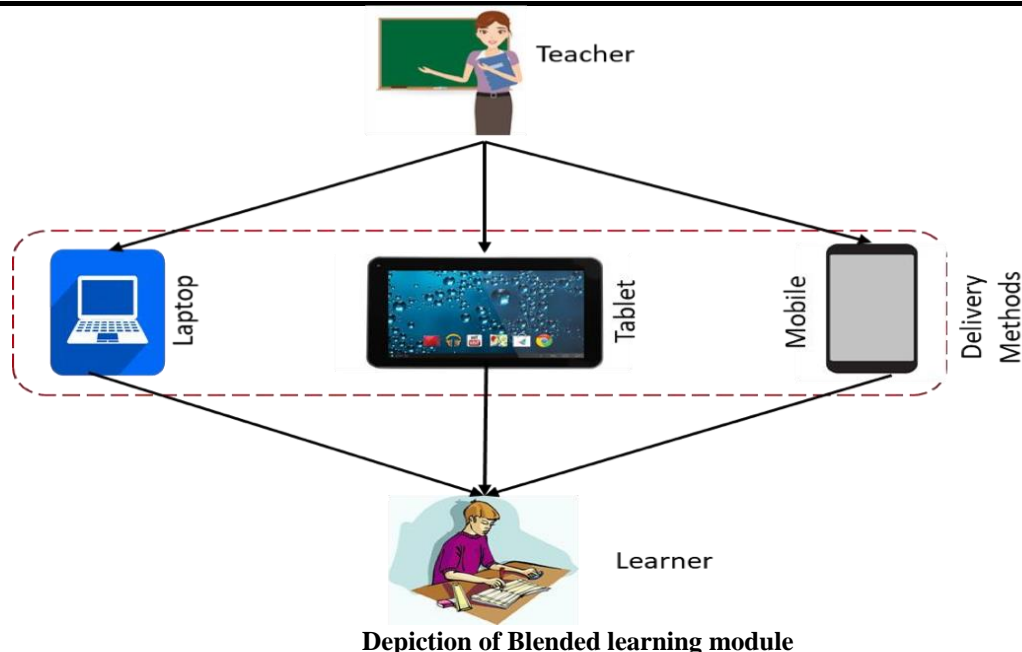
Education during this time was focused on physical and mental development of students. The resultant of such education system is creation of many iconic minds, greatest rulers, and scholars during those times. Universities like, Nalanda, Takshashila are some of the prominent learning centers. Once students learn their skills, an opportunity was provided to assimilate with public in a way to test their learning in the actual way of life. It was actual blend of classroom and practical exposure to create strong minds to serve society.

The major changes to Indian education system have witnessed during colonial rule. Especially Lord Macauley's recommendation. "*A single shelf of good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia*". This is the exact phrase mentioned by Lord Macauley in his justification to deject age old Indian education system. The industrial age changed the way to learning to create workforce for industries by training them to follow just instructions.

National Education Policy 2020 has explored many possibilities and dimensions to make education a comprehensive and equivalent to global requirements. An effort made to align the education system to bring into world forum. Hence, no thought to go back towards gurukul way of learning. Technology has played a major role in shaping such changes to new education policy. Main reason for such change is internet. With high penetration and speed, internet has arrived at every corner of the house, creating many possibilities to learning. Blended Learning is one such major outcome due to this technological advancement.

II. BLENDED LEARNING

Blended Learning is also termed as a hybrid way of learning or mixed way of learning, is combining classroom and online learning without the complete loss of face-to-face contact. It is blending of both conventional way of learning - which is classroom learning with technology interface or use of technology as a tool for learning. A physical and nonphysical presence of learners with multiple platforms are the uniqueness of blended learning. It's a combination of online and classroom instructions. The demand for quick problem-solving techniques, immediate response, provide accurate information real time, collaborate with multiple people across multiple locations at the same time, focus on achieving short term goals are the need of the hour. Emphasis is more on knowledge management, thus transformation in business is more focused rather transactions. The meaning of skilled workforce has changed, they are, those who are equipped with technology and has abilities to guide and handle technology-oriented challenges.

Depiction of Blended learning module

Since blended learning is student-centric, more facilitation is given to students for their flexibility in enhancing their knowledge and encouraged to participate collaboratively in the evaluation process.

BLENDED LEARNING – CHALLENGES

In the context of Higher education, the challenges to blended learning is explored in this article. Higher education is the stage where, students are very closer to be part for societal integration. Contribution to society through implementation of learning should be predominantly clear at this stage. Hence, required skills through assimilation to expectations must be clearly understood. Considerable amount of practical exposure while at education can give more confidence to students. While implementing blended learning at Higher education level, more emphasis should be given to overall developments, rather than limiting to mere facilitation.

Few key challenges in this regard are;

Missing of Mentorship at critical level

Mentoring is most important in the process of learning. Mentoring gives an extra stimulation to shapeup student, without giving room for confusions in his career. Clarity on one's SWOT can be analysed by a mentor, and focused approach is possible to guide and make improvement further. At higher education level, more conformity on one's future goals is must. Further in work life, it may be difficult or costlier to make any changes or make u turn. A mentor can facilitate and channelise this through close monitoring and can ensure setting firm and stable goals. But, under blended learning, mentoring may be challenging.

Building wrong perceptions to learning

Blended learning is student-centric approach, which gives independence to one's imagination and perception to interpret the knowledge he is grasping. The learnings through blended approach are perceived in a manner with the exposure and experience one has gained sofar, perceptions may not be correct to the actuals. In this process, learning will have a specific boundary as per to one's experience. Learning curve depends largely on perceptions, correction at each time is challenging through blended learning approach

Obtain Clarity, Gain Competencies, and interest among teachers to facilitate Blended learning

Teacher is indispensable part of learning process. Lack of clarity on what is expected out of blended learning and competencies in handling ICT tools among teaching fraternity is more important. Lack of clarity and competencies are damaging to blended learning process. Most critical questions like, the combination of pedagogy the teacher should use, resources to use, resources to mine from, knowledge on ICT tools, comprehensive activity tools, content development tools, software to use ICT effectively, interactive presentation skills, etc should be clear to a teacher. He should constantly show interest and enthusiasm in upgrading while using blended learning. Teachers should show more supremacy in mastering these, to gain respect from students. As teacher should not only facilitate, but to create interest in learning process among students.

Affordability, reliability and easy to use of technology

Technology is the heart and soul in blended learning process. Use of Technology is critical in every process of blended learning. Both teacher and student should be well equipped to effectively utilize technology to the best. Technology combined with technique can give best results. Wrong usage of Technology can lead to irreparable consequences. Affordability of technology, and related ICT tools can make learning more effective. Unfortunately, in Indian context, the downfall of government backed BSNL. It has incurred a combined loss of Rs. 90,000 crores and in the process of closing its business in India. Its important to have such orgnaistations to provide subsidized schemes for rural locations. In India, its mandatory to have government companies in critical sectors like telecommunication to provide affordability and accessibility. The purpose of such organsiations is to uplift society. The raise of private companies with profit motives, is a costlier aspect to blended learning process.

Complete dependency on ICT and not having skills and competencies to handle without such tools among teachers can be devastating to learning process. Suppose, interruptions to technology while teaching should be handled by a teacher effectively. Poor infrastructure and connectivity are always experienced. He should not be disabled or handicapped, if incase of failure of technology or ICT tools,. Teacher as a resource person, should not completely depend on technology which may sometime can be detrimental to increase his knowledge horizon.

Ease of using technology depends on one's interest to learn and constant update of technology.

Challenge to early assimilation to work culture

As blended learning mode is focused towards student centric, prominence is more on self-learning. Limited possibilities are explored to upskill students through practical way. As in, less emphasis given to practical learnings likes project work, internship, on the job training etc. practical learning helps in synchronizing thoughts to actions. At higher education level, which is a crucial stage for students to enter in to work culture, the prior exposure to practical knowledge helps in assimilation to work environment. There is clear distinction between experienced and fresher candidate while inducting to an organization. It's an added advantage if a student has blend of theory and practical knowledge during his higher education level.

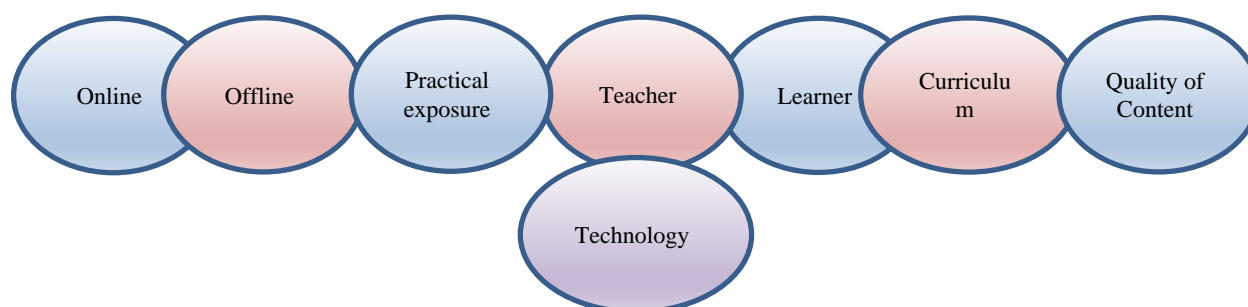**BLENDED LEARNING – OPPORTUNITIES**

Blended learning is not new, but more evolving subject if we combine ICT component. Otherwise, blended learning as a concept, is practiced in many ways since time immemorial. The blend has gradually varied to suit to the eco system of that time. Blend for ancient Indian learning may be combining practical and theoretical approach, multi-disciplinary approach to create master in administration. The need for such blend in present eco system is requirement to create managerial effectiveness.

As **Albert Einstein** aptly says, *I do not teach anyone, I only provide the environment in which they can learn.*

A right blend of learning environment is a critical component for effective learning process. Though there are limitations to blended learning process in NEP, it has created more opportunities to help explore the subject. Specific to higher education level, few key opportunities are discussed below:

More meaningful blending

Is blended learning is just limited to blending online and offline? Can we clearly devise a mechanism to derive an exact percentage to blend, as 60% classroom and 50% online or any such combination suited? Also, is there something more to blend other than online and offline. Clarity should be sought on this regard precisely. There is more opportunity to blended learning experience by combining different modes very rationally and carefully. Some of the critical components of learning should be blended properly. Could we justify the blend to the need of content, syllabus and context to which the student is learning. There is immense opportunity to explore such questions. Teacher should be trained and equipped to understand the concept of blend while teaching in class. Teacher should effectively use these blends to suit to the class and suit to individual students. Afterall, teacher is the mentor for any student after their parents.

Few critical components of proper Blend

Constant Training to Teachers

Teacher's experience, exposure and thoughts is behind every content, irrespective of the mode it is delivered. For this purpose, constant training is an opportunity to reskill and upskill teachers to help align students to the expectations of today's world. Orientation programs for teachers should be modified to suit to empower teachers to blended learning. Training on ICT tools should become a constant process to stay relevant in blended learning. He should be a proactive learner and self-motivated to upgrade himself or herself. Most of the time, students watch and learn, when teachers spend more time in learning and upgrading, students will obviously follow. Opportunities with certain incentive programs should be planned to create enthusiasm among teachers' fraternity to embrace such learnings.

Out of Class-room Learning

In the context of Higher education, blended learning should create opportunities to out of class experiences like, interactions with industry experts, encourage to gain knowledge through on-the-job training, internships, gain knowledge through print mediums etc. This mode is an opportunity to students to apply their learning in real situations and help them test their perception level of learning.

Also, an opportunity should be created to students to come back to teacher and his peers after such out-of-classroom learning to clarify doubts and share experience to course corrections. This should be part of assessment of students learning. Collaborative learning is possible through such actions. This is also an important part of flipped classroom process.

To conclude, teacher should know exactly, what tool to use, when to use and how much to use. Teacher can't be replaced completely with technology, since he knows clearly on the level of learning curve of each student. What kind of guidance each student needs, what pace to use, how it should be facilitated, how the same should be blended with various components. Learning should not be limited to delivery, but to make an impact, also should focus on engaging and challenge individuals to surmount their limitations.

Empowering teacher and making them the center of learning process should be the main objective of blended learning. Otherwise, gradual disconnect will develop and slowly the link between teacher and learner will disappear. This will lead to more perception building among young citizens in society and can create irreparable damage for future generations.

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