Use of Virtual Classroom in Teaching through Distance Mode: A Case Study of SCDL

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Abstract

The author has divided the paper into four parts. The first part deals with the idea of distance education and the constraints faced by distance learners. The second part focuses on virtual classroom, its advantages and disadvantages. The presenter believes that with the help of virtual classroom, the gap between the distance learner and the facilitator can be bridged. This innovative learning experience will help to create a “boundary less” learning environment especially useful for a distance learner. One of the major advantages of virtual classroom is that the distance learner can attend a class by sitting at his convenient place. The learner requires only a computer with internet connection to attend the virtual class. The next part talks about the three users of virtual classroom and the concluding part deals with the successful implementation of virtual classroom at Symbiosis Centre for Distance Learning, Pune.

Keywords: distance education, learners, virtual classroom, computer, internet.
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Society is undergoing a transformation evoked by the rapid development and diffusion of information and communication technology (ICT) in all walks of life. It has occupied the centre stage of all developments and is making a profound impact on society. It has also made a considerable impact on teaching learning process. New types of educational technologies have emerged at an ever-accelerating pace and Open & Distance Learning (ODL) is not an exception to it. The impact of ICT has led to the new avenues in the field of ODL. As a result, many innovative techniques are used in ODL for making teaching learning process more fascinating.

One of the innovative and useful techniques used for teaching learning process is teaching through Virtual Classroom. One of the major constraints faced by distance learners is the absence of an Academic Faculty to guide them face-to-face & answer their queries. With the help of virtual class, the gap between the learner and the facilitator can be bridged. This innovative learning experience will help to create a “boundary less” learning environment especially useful for a distance learner.

Before we proceed further, first we must know the meaning of 'distance education'. Distance education as we know it today began with what Moore called the third generation of Distance Education. According to Moore, the period from the 1960s and early 1970s was a time of critical change in distance education, resulting from several experiments with new ways of organizing technology and human resources, leading to new instructional techniques and new educational theorizing (Moore and Kearsley, 2005). Keegan (1988) stated that distance education is the normal provision of education for the working man & woman, the homemaker, those who do not wish to attend a conventional institution, and sometimes for their children.

Here are some of the definitions of 'Distance Education'

1. Education that takes place when the instructor and student are separated by space and/or time. The gap between the two can be bridged through the use of technology - such as audio tapes, videoconferencing, satellite broadcasts and online technology - and/or more traditional delivery methods, such as the postal service. (www.oregonone.org/glossary.htm)

2. An educational process and system in which all or a significant proportion of the teaching is carried out by someone or something removed in space and time from the learner. Distance education requires structured planning, well-designed courses, special instructional techniques and methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as specific organizational and administrative arrangements. (www.unesco.org/education/eduprog/lwf/doc/portfolio/definitions.htm)

After considering this background, it is very much essential that new instructional techniques need to be used for the betterment of distance learners and virtual classroom is one of the ways of effective and interactive communication. Now let's consider some of the features of virtual classroom.

Virtual Classroom:

A lot of significant changes have taken place in the educational field due to growing popularity and
access to the internet. It is very much essential that an educational institute makes utmost use of 'e-facilities' for making the teaching learning process more effective. One of the important e-facilities is Virtual Classroom and radical transformation can be brought in teaching learning process with the help of virtual classroom.

In this facility of virtual classroom, the distance learner does not have to attend a class in a traditional way, but one can attend the class either from one's home, workplace or any cyber café. To attend the virtual class, the learner requires only a computer with internet connection. With the help of this facility, the learner can clarify his doubts by asking questions in live sessions by sitting at his convenient place.

The term 'virtual' means a simulation of the real thing, virtual classroom is a simulated classroom via Internet, which provides a convenient communication environment for distance learners just like traditional face-to-face classroom. A virtual classroom aspires to provide a learning experience that is similar to a real classroom.

Here are some of the Definitions of Virtual Classroom:
1. A virtual classroom is similar like a real classroom as it has a schedule which is implemented online where teachers and learners interact together using computers linked to Internet.
2. Any means of live or pre-programmed Internet broadcast of information meant to function in a teaching capacity. For example, you could say “see you in the virtual classroom” and meet at a particular URL that is dispensing information.
(www.geek.com)

The virtual classroom facility in distance learning institutes is an additional student support service to interact with faculty members. It is an online learning space where students and faculty members interact and Symbiosis Centre for Distance Learning has successfully implemented this facility for the learners. Virtual classroom can be compared to the actual classroom, the only difference between them is, virtual class is live Internet broadcast, where teacher and students are separated by different geographic location and they interact with each other by way of multimedia resources.

The technical requirements for virtual classroom of SCDL are:
1. Computer with internet connection
2. Any internet browser (preferably Internet Explorer) with latest Flash player
3. Speakers
4. Headphone & Webcam (Optional for students, mandatory to expert)

The advantages of Virtual Classroom are
1. As it is an online learning, students and faculty members do not have the geographical barrier. It saves their time and money.
2. It can take place from anywhere and according to the convenience of both.
3. It can be recorded so that students as well as faculty members can view the class in future for better understanding and improvement. This can help faculty members to review their classes and they can discuss with their colleagues for suggestions.
4. It can replace the classroom teaching.

5. The facility of chat helps students to ask their doubts to the faculty member. At the same time by raising one's hand, learner can ask his/her query with the help of audio input.

6. The facility of chat also helps to have discussion among students; they can express their views on the given topic.

7. The faculty member has the facility of whiteboard, which can be used to draw figures, tables, writing important points, etc.

As we are familiar with the saying 'Every coin has two sides', the same is the case with virtual classroom.

**The disadvantages of Virtual Classroom are**

1. Familiarity with Technology: The basic requirement for conducting or attending virtual classroom is familiarity with technology. If either teacher or student is not familiar with it, then it is of no use to them.

2. As there are many features like audio input, video input, chat session, whiteboard, PPT, etc, it might be difficult for a teacher to handle the class in an effective manner.

3. One of the basic requirements for conducting virtual classroom is connection to internet & if one does not have access to internet, then one cannot take part in virtual classroom.

4. If one does not have latest softwares like Flash Player 10 and Internet Explorer on his computer, then it might create problem before or during the class.

5. The participants as well as facilitator might face some technical problems like electricity failure, echo of audio input, speed of internet connection, etc.

**Three Users of Virtual Classroom:**

'Administrator, Expert or Teacher and Participant or Student' are the three important users of any virtual classroom and without them a class cannot function. All these play a vital role to make virtual classroom a success. Administrator gets access to admin interface. Expert gets access to expert interface. Students get access to student interface.

1. **Role of an Administrator:** The administrator initiates the process of virtual classroom.
With the help of login screen, the admin logs in and goes to the admin home page.

Figure 2: Admin Home Page

With the help of admin home page, admin manages the complete process of virtual classroom like,

To schedule a class in consultation with the faculty or expert (In case of any calamity, admin has the right to reschedule or cancel the class by discussing with the faculty)
To display the schedule of the classes on the website
To upload the PowerPoint Presentation of the faculty
To check whether all the devices are functioning properly like audio input, video input, etc.
To launch & record the class
To send auto reminder (mass mail) to the students, who have registered to the class
To manage the class technically

Figure 3: Admin View for launching the virtual classroom
2. **Role of an Expert or Teacher:** Another important user of virtual classroom is an expert or a teacher, who conducts the class or who initiates the process of teaching and learning. The main role of an expert is to manage the class with the help of his teaching. The expert needs to prepare a PPT for conducting a virtual class.

The screen shot of expert’s view is given below:

![Figure 4: Teacher's View of virtual classroom](image)

**Importance of Teacher in Virtual Class:** As teacher plays an important role in traditional classroom, same is the case with virtual classroom. To become an effective virtual classroom teacher, one must have certain qualities in him or her as ‘a good classroom teacher is not necessarily a good online teacher’ (Davis & Roblyer, 2005). Davis & Roblyer also cite several areas of unique competence for distance instructors like

- Course planning and organization
- Verbal and nonverbal presentation
- Ability to use questioning strategies
- Ability to involve and coordinate student activities
- Effective communication skills
- Familiarity with virtual management techniques
- Training for online teaching

If you wish to make teaching through virtual classroom for distance learners successful then it is required that faculty should be trained in technology and one must remember that online teaching is very much different from the traditional teaching as it is totally dependant on technology.
3. **Role of the student or participant:** With the help of student login, a student can participate in virtual classroom, for this he needs to follow certain steps.

*For Booking:*

- Visit the website and click on 'Existing students' link
- Enter valid user credentials to login and click on 'Submit' button to login
- Click on the virtual class link, which will take the student to 'virtual classroom center' page
- Virtual classroom center page shows 2 lists, 'Sessions Open for Booking' & 'Confirmed Booked Sessions', students need to do the needful

*For attending the class:* Once student has booked a class, one can attend the class. To attend the class one needs to follow these steps:

- To attend the class, login with the help of Student-Portal, Choose virtual classroom option and click on respective class from 'Confirmed-Booked Sessions' grid
- To launch a class, click on 'Launch Class' button, this will launch the class on student's computer, so that one can view the class
- After launching the class, student can view and listen to the class. The screen shot of the same is given below:

![Figure 5: Student's View of Virtual Classroom](image-url)
In conclusion, we must remember that virtual classroom plays a vital role in teaching learning process for distance learning students. This is a facility, which will encourage students to participate in learning process from any corner of the world and Symbiosis Centre for Distance Learning, Pune, one of the private Open and Distance Learning institutes in India has taken a step forward towards Online Learning and has introduced the pioneering and innovative concept of Virtual Classroom to reach out to students from all corners of the country and abroad.

References


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