Prospect of Email Communication as an Educational Tool for Distance Education in Bangladesh

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Theme: Provision for youth and young children

Abstract

Bangladesh Open University (BOU) is the only public University in Bangladesh which provides higher education through distance mode. At present BOU offers 21 formal programmes. BOU provides printed materials to the learners which are prepared in a self-learning style of distance education. The learning procedure also includes audio-video programmes and some face-to-fact teaching classes called 'tutorial class'. In reality, these are not enough for learners to complete the whole course successfully. Today, Internet has replaced all means of traditional communication significantly. In the past decade only youth and young generations were playing with it, but today it has been found that aged people have also gladly accepted it for communication with others. Email is the most popular means of communication medium now-a-days. Therefore, it may be used as an educational tool for learning. In present socio-economic condition of Bangladesh, learners can afford computer or cell phone to access Internet and email. We took this opportunity to investigate the prospective use of these tools for distant learning. To the best of our knowledge, there is no report regarding acceptance and possible use of e-mail communication as additional educational tool for BOU learners. This paper presents survey result carried out to understand the present status of Internet and email knowledge among the learners and their views for possible introduction of Internet and e-mail communication as supporting tool for learning. Furthermore, by investigating BOU's available infrastructural facilities, possible cost effective solutions have been suggested to provide e-mail facility to the learner.

Introduction

With the growing popularity and fast expansion of Internet, its role in learning becomes more and more important. In the educational field, Internet is not only one of the instrument media, but also a useful source of information. As we get deeper into the information age, traditional ways of learning and knowledge acquisition are challenged with rapidly changing technologies and a fast growing knowledge base requiring competencies and skills to be renewed frequently.

BOU handles a large number of learners admitted at different programs where learners are spread all over the country. These programs are aimed for every energetic, hard working people and particularly those who don't get chance to enroll themselves in traditional educational institutions due to various reasons. According to Kirkwood (1998), the learning procedure includes tutorial supported audio and video programs. In reality, these are not enough for learners to complete the whole course successfully. Therefore, BOU arranges some face-to-fact teaching classes called 'Tutorial class' (Ali and et. al., 1997). There are several other programs at the planning and development stage to be offered by BOU. At present, BOU provides printed materials, Audio cassettes and also broadcasts audio-video programs for the learners. But, the way communication takes place between learners and tutors cannot always meet the present demand. Due to lack of frequent interaction between tutors and learners, complexity arises and the entire study process suffers.

Many education institutions are answering this challenge by developing online courses and distance education programs. They can rely on novel digital learning infrastructure and have information and communication technologies at their hands to build global learning infrastructures. These developments promise to overcome some of the limitations of traditional distance education models. It is essential to know the present Internet usage scenario among the learners and infrastructural facilities available to suggest effective information and communication technologies. In the past decade only young generations were playing with it, but today it has been found that aged people have also gladly accepted it for communication with others. According to Joshi and Saxena (2005), email is the most popular means of communication medium now-a-days. Therefore, we have explored the possible use of email as an asynchronous communication tool to communicate with learners. We also provided a list of suggestions for incorporating email as educational tool for distance education in Bangladesh.

Email as Educational Tool

Researchers are looking to email as a promising instructional and learning tool. However, its strength as an educational tool relies solely on constructing a solid email-based environment and a pedagogically sound message. Email could be used as a feedback and communication tool.

Smith, Whiteley and Smith (1999), over the course of three studies, conclude that email is a "viable alternative means of course delivery". Debard and Guidara (1999) extol the need for better and more frequent use of asynchronous communication in the higher education classroom. They find that asynchronous communication, such as email, can be adopted to meet Chickering and Reisser's seven principals of effective teaching. They stress that email can increase faculty-student contact resulting in improved student involvement and motivation. Debard and Guidara (1999) also point to email as a source of more intensive student interaction that can lead to deeper, more active, and more engaged learning.

Email can be a wonderful tool for delivering feedback to learners. Once a basic understanding of feedback's role in learning has been established, one can begin to focus on how best to take advantage of the pedagogical functions of the communication medium. There is little doubt that email is changing how we communicate and learn. For example, in an investigation of the effectiveness of email as a communication and instructional aid between instructors and learners, Yu and Yu (2002) found "empirical evidence supporting the usefulness of e-mail as a promising aid to promote student cognitive growth pertaining to computer knowledge and skills". Tao and Boulware (2002) suggest that email communication benefits teachers by "identifying instructional focus and taking advantage of instructional moments to fit the developmental needs of their students in authentic situations". They also find that email motivates learners, encourages authentic communication, and creates new learning opportunities. In a qualitative case study of undergraduate students in an online course, Vonderwell (2003) finds that email allows for improved communication and gives students the opportunity to ask more questions of their instructor.

Although there are some negative aspects exists regarding Email communication. Woods and Keeler (2001) cite research highlighting the potential social negatives of email use such as user isolation, user depression and loneliness, and the potential lack of a learning community. Bloch (2002) is also concerned about the social aspect of email and finds that misunderstandings and conflicts can abound without a face-to-face context.

Unlike phone calls, emails are a written record. One may be held accountable for anything put in writing. Spelling and grammar in email messages sent to students should be taken care of. Many people feel that the informal correspondence in email is perfectly appropriate.

Methods

The literature review was done to reveal the prospect of email communication. A lot of web based technology initiatives have been found around the world. However, in Bangladesh, web based technologies as communication tool for distant education are rarely used. Searching via the Internet for computerized reference lists of retrieved articles, literature and relevant materials were performed.

Currently, BOU has 21 educational programs in various disciplines. We have prepared a structured questionnaire for the learners of those programs where we have selected the respondents randomly. The

questionnaire was constructed in accordance with the objective and significance of the study. The specific interest of the questionnaire was to know the over all status of the learner and their access to technology.

Analysis

The quantitatively analyzed data received by survey on the learners of different programs of BOU has been presented below. The data given in the Table-1 describes the scenario of the learners using Internet by both Computer and Mobile Phone according to location.

Table: 1: Communication Places of the respondents

Communication Place	Percentage
Home	35
Work Place	22
Tutorial Center	32
Other Place	11
BOU's RRC/LC	0

The survey shows that about 82% of the respondents are interested in using email by computer for communication and 18% are interested in using email by cell phone, besides the existing tools of BOU for learning. About 91% of the learners prefer to use email and internet at the BOU Regional Resource Center (RRC) and Local Center (LC) for learning. For this purpose, 98% of the learners would like to use this service at free of cost and they suggested that BOU should provide the necessary technological setup for them.

In our survey 61% of the respondents are male and 39% are female. This supports the basic objective of BOU to cater the deprived and weaker groups including women. Table-2 shows that female learners are potential user of Internet.

Table: 2: Gender-wise Internet Users

	Computer Owner (%)	Cell Phone Owner (%)	Internet User (Computer or Cell Phone based) (%)
Male	56	90	68
Female	22	80	35

Survey report shows that 52% of the learners are having their own email connection and 88% of the learners are having cell phone of their own.

About 66% of the respondents are residing in urban areas and 34% in rural area. The Table-3 shows that learners in urban area use Internet more than learners in rural area. This observation indicates that BOU should adopt strategies to extend the Internet facilities toward the learners residing or working in rural and backward regions.

Table: 3: Location of the Internet Users

	Internet User (Computer or Cell Phone based) (%)
Urban	82
Rural	22

Summary of Findings

Based on analysis and Interpretation, following findings of the study have emerged. The term 'email and Internet' was familiar to the BOU learners. Most of the learners of BOU showed positive attitude and gave positive opinions regarding email communication. Email and Internet are effective tools for interaction as well as to make a bridge of communication between both tutors and learners, and BOU teachers and learners for enhancing distance learning. BOU should adopt these tools as educational technologies for the distant learners. Most of the learners (94%) gave their opinions that email technologies supports the teachers or tutors to consult in a better way.

Almost (82%) learners showed eagerness to communicate with teachers by email using Computer system. But, there are potential email users by cell phone as the cell phone is easy to operate, economy call rate and affordable price. Many of the learners (91%) wanted to communicate with the teachers/ tutor using BOU email setup at BOU regional resource centers. Among them (98%) learners expects to use email setup at free of cost.

BOU Infrastructure at present

Bangladesh Open University has 12 Regional Resource Centers (RRC), 80 Coordinating Office (CO) and nearly 1000 Tutorial Centers (TC) all over the country. Each of the offices has telephone and fax line. Within BOU main campus, there is a computer network with servers and essential software. But there is no dedicated data network exists between Main office and RRC/LC. Presently, each individual office uses dial-up connection to connect with the ISP and to provide internet services.

Using email in the classroom requires a certain level of technical expertise and considerable technical support (Carswell, et al., 2000). Training and access are also factors. Both instructors and learners need to be oriented to

the email system and its many features. However, at present not all of the BOU teachers and tutors of TC have proper training and access to technology to exercise email system as educational tool.

List of Recommendations

Following list of suggestions or guidelines could be made based on our survey result of the present study and from our years of experience. Many of these suggestions relate directly to improving learner-to-learner, and learner-to-teacher interaction in manners that enhance instruction.

- BOU should provide free access to web enabled devices, such as, computer, PDA, cell phone etc. as tools for learning at RRC and LC.
- BOU should establish their own communication link between main campus and RRC and LC for providing email and Internet facilities for learning.
- Proper training should be extended to the BOU teachers and tutors of TC for using email system as educational tool.
- BOU should take the initiative to utilize positive attitude of the learners towards Internet usage for enhancing distant learning. To build up awareness in this direction some motivational activities would be taken into account.
- Additionally, other web-based technologies should be incorporated to ensure more effective way of distant learning besides email communication.
- BOU authority should integrate technology and technology study into the curriculum.
- BOU policy makers should take necessary steps to provide email and Internet facilities for the learners' at free of cost.

About half of the BOU learners have access to computer and internet at their home or at the tutorial centers. Learners' who have web enabled mobile phone can use it. As the development of a web based application system will be suitable for the learners who have access to computer and internet.

Concluding Remarks

There are few disadvantages to the use of email as educational tool, such as, the absence of verbal communication and text-based nature of the medium. Also email communication can be time consuming and often means extra work for teachers.

However, email communication can create a healthy academic atmosphere through better interaction between teacher and learner, and learner and learner. Mutual discussion among the learners will also be beneficial for the learning process. Thus two was asynchronous communication can enhance the learning process and knowing each other.

The number of Computer and Cell phone user is increasing significantly in Bangladesh over the past few years. Accordingly access and attraction to use email is increasing among the BOU learners. BOU should take positive initiative to utilize the learners' interest and ensure email access for distance learners'. This initiative could be the base of further research for future inception of Web based learning at BOU.

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