

Distraction proneness in online learning environment: A study

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Abstract

As online learning has become ubiquitous, its implementation in the educational institutions is growing at an accelerating rate. No doubt the online mode has been very helpful in many ways. It has been a good medium of conducting classes and projects for teachers. For students it has been very helpful in quick and easy procurement of knowledge. For research students too it has been even more helpful for conducting surveys, interviews, retrieving of information etc. However, it has its own downsides. Students are facing challenge with focusing on learning. Students have now more opportunity than ever before to engage in social media activities in online learning. As these social media are very appealing, students tend to switch between their ongoing online class lectures to other sites more frequently. Thus, distracting them from their studies which are more important to them. This can affect their studies adversely as attention is an important part of learning. In this paper an attempt has been made to discuss about how students are prone to getting exposed to external contents and hence get distracted often. This study will help educators identify how students get distracted while online learning and take remedial measures.

KEYWORDS: Distractions, online learning, focus, teaching and learning, attention

1. Introduction

Technology is rapidly replacing the traditional classroom setting. With the penetration of technology there has been a revolution in the education system (Tyner, 2014). The teaching-learning process is now taking place in online mode where students can now easily access to online classrooms just from the comfort of their homes. Though this mode of learning has been very helpful in compensating the offline classes when physical presence of teacher-student in class room setting is not possible, it has come to notice that learners are very prone to distractions. The 24-hour easy access to computer with internet connected in it compels learners to switch from ongoing class/educational sites to other non-educational sites which they find more interesting. It consumes their crucial time as it is difficult to get back the "focus" once engaged. Thus, there is a need to explore how students are getting distracted during online learning.

2. Conceptualization of terms

2.1 Attention

Attention is a process when one dedicates mind to a specific task with interest. It is an act of directing mind to something with concentration.

2.2 Distraction

Distraction basically means the deviation of attention from the ongoing task to other activities. It is a process where an individual gets disrupted and fails to concentrate on the on-going task.

2.3 Online learning

Online learning basically means the learning that takes place through gadgets with internet connected in it. It is a platform of learning where the teacher and the taught are physically far away from each other but are connected through the medium of technologies. It is a situation where learners can easily access and acquire knowledge from anywhere and anytime. Other names of online learning include e-learning, distance learning, online education etc.

3. Objectives

1. To discuss about how students are prone to getting exposed to external contents in online learning.
2. To suggest suitable measure in overcoming the distraction faced by students.

4. Methodology

The methodology used in this study is mainly descriptive and exploratory in nature. An attempt has been made to discuss how distractions happen in online learning based on secondary data by reviewing various research papers, articles, books, thesis, online resources etc. Further from these sources analysis have been done in a descriptive way to arrive at a conclusion.

5. Distraction in online learning

With the current trend of online learning, technology is rapidly replacing the traditional classroom teaching learning process. When used effectively it can undeniably be of great help to teachers and learners. But unfortunately, students are found to fail in this effective utilization of technology. In online class it becomes easy for the students to turn off their camera, mic and just get distracted to the other site which are more entertaining. "It is far too easy to open up another browser tab, turn on some music, or check your Instagram when you are using your computer/phone/tablet to do schoolwork," (Gillick & Magoulas, 2020). Nowadays everyone has social media accounts and they are found to be more interested in devoting their time there. Once they switch to the other sites, it can consume most of their time as it becomes difficult to get back to studies. "Online students are inherently exposed to distractions. All of their coursework takes place on some form of computer; be it desktop, tablet, smartphone, or laptop. YouTube or video games are just a click away, and since many online students study autonomously, they have little to stop them from switching over. Once focus has shifted from study to entertainment, there is a deep dark chasm of media that constantly shifts focus to create some new distraction", (Neiterman & Zaza, 2019). The students therefore are found to be engaging themselves with multiple sites on their screens while learning online. In their study McMahon and Pospisil (2005) in their study have found that students while trying to use technology for the benefit lose their focus because they try to do multiple things simultaneously. Research has shown ample evidence that students rather than dedicating their time only to studies during online class, tend to engage themselves in multiple tasks thus getting distracted. "The students try multiple things simultaneously, like chatting, playing games, sending e-mails and trying to absorb complex material being taught, but they fail in this", (Hembrooke & Gay, 2003). Fried (2018) asserted that this multitasking leads to what we call as students' distraction.

In his study of Olugbenga (2020) it revealed that 87% of the students strongly agreed and 13% of them agreed that they get distracted by pop ups of various sites during online learning. In like manner, 79% of the students tend to wander off to non-academic online activities. “Distractions are hard to avoid while engaging in achievement-related activities”, (Schmitz & Wolters, 2011). The importance of attention in learning is widely recognized. Attention is optimum when an individual is focused on a single task. However, students tend to multitask while studying. This is supported by the study of Sana et al., (2013) that during multitasking the attention is decreased, and the performance is decreased. Similarly, Bergen et al. (2005) in their study found that multimedia message format exceeds viewers’ attention and absorbance capacity. Wood et al. (2012) in their study found that multitasking with social media and related technologies lead to poor academic performance.

As students while attending online classes do not actually stay online only for learning purpose, their attention easily gets divided among multiple activities which is detrimental to their academic performance. The worst thing here is that not many are aware of this menace. Al-Ahdal and Shariq (2019) in their study asserted that only few teachers and parents advocate the danger of dependency on technology as a learning tool, of which the biggest one is distraction. Hence, here it becomes very crucial for the teachers as well as parents to take remedial measures. “Online learners are required to be acquainted with skills to prevent themselves from numerous attractions of online multimedia or entertainment”, (Tsai, 2009, p.40).

SUGESTIONS

- Make learning student centric by engaging the students more often.
- While giving power point presentation, the teachers can limit the use of texts and use visual representation more often so that the students get engaged in listening and watching for a longer duration.
- Teaching must be interesting enough to hold the attention of students.
- Teachers must monitor appropriately if students are actively listening to lectures or simply turning off their camera, mic and getting indulged in other sites.
- Teachers should periodically ask questions so that students remain active to answer.
- To teachers should try to establish good rapport with students by creating online groups like on telegram, WhatsApp etc., where teacher-students can have communications apart from the course discussion. This will help the students in not shying away from participation in the online class.
- When a student asks or answers to question. Teacher must praise so that it will encourage other students and give them a sense of motivation to participate as well.
- Teachers must give students assignment or projects for students to present it online.
- Students should minimize their curiosity of jumping from one site to another.
- Practicing meditation on a daily basis can help in developing concentration.
- Parents must keep an eye on their children and ensure that during online classes their children are dedicating their time to the classes only and not on the other entertaining sites.

Conclusion

As convenient and easy the online education may seem, research evidence abounds the distractions this mode of learning cause to learners. Although there are constraints the above-mentioned suggestions must be incorporated to overcome this.

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