

Socio-Cultural Aspects of E-learning in Iran Higher Education

Abstract

The E-learning's success is not just the result of educational processes. There are also numerous cultural, social, economic and political factors that contribute to its development.

Despite the efforts made in some developing countries and the investments in E-learning, the applicants' and their families' interest in E-courses is not pleasing and satisfactory.

Can we look at this issue from cultural point of view? This is the main question of this study.

The results of this exploratory study are obtained through interviews with focus groups. The results indicate the main reasons of the applicants' or their families' little interests as follow:

- The feeling of not having scientific identity among students of virtual universities
- Lack of a feeling of "belonging to a group" among virtual students
- The continuance of oral and written culture and their dominance over digital culture
- The feeling of higher social prestige among students who attend to universities
- Considering electronic learning as a subordinate education not a main education
- Having doubts about validity of virtual universities' degrees
- Having unreal assumptions about different aspects of virtual universities

Keywords: *E-learning, Higher Education, Cultural Aspects, Iran*

Introduction

Iran, a country with 75 million population and 3.8 million students, has only 12925 students who study electronically in virtual universities. While in Iran, there are 28 million internet users, and electronic learning development presented in government documents as a policy, families and

applicants' little interest in virtual universities needs to be considered seriously. Nevertheless, the society climate of domestic and international is characterized by increasing prevalence of electronic learning.

The number of Iranian student based on method of education and gender in academic year

2009-2010

Method of education	Governmental		Non- governmental		Total	
	Female	Sum	Female	Sum	Female	Sum
Full time	594,912	1,246,855	699,696	239	129,4608	2,946,528
Part time	574,972	830,846	234	560	575,206	831,406
E- learning	3,889	10,586	1,263	2,339	5,152	12,925
Total	1,173,773	208,8287	70,1193	1,702,572	1,874,966	3,790,859

Source: statistic of higher education of Iran, 1388-89, IRPHE

According to the table, the portion of e-learning in compare to the total of country's student is very small and unacceptable.

In order to explore the problematic aspect of electronic learning in Iran, we should consider socio-cultural contexts; because in a situation that government policies encourage e-learning development, and technical and management infrastructures are relatively provided, lack of motivation and interest of applicants indicates a gap between supply and demand. In such situations the market for electronic learning cannot be developed.

The reason of such a problem can be explained by strongly taking into consideration learning approaches such as behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism and communicativism.

Some Iranian researchers have explained the reason of failure of electronic learning projects by using Innovation Diffusion Theory. According to this theory, an innovation at first will be

implemented by pioneers. If the results of this innovation were positive, others will also consider it. In the same way that an innovation attracts more people, the number of those who have not used this innovation decreases until a new innovation replaces the previous one. (Rahimidoost & Razavi, 2006)

Social and Cultural Aspects

Rosenberg (2006, pp. 18-23) believes that the exaggerated claim on e-learning results from the legends, for example, these kinds of courses are cheap or easy or using e-learning is equal to the success in work.

Rosenberg discusses the limitations of e-learning for meeting expectations and cites the research report of Markvan Biren and Martin Sloman stating that as much as 62 percent of all learning technologies fail to meet expectations. He also points out to other study done on 139 companies in 17 countries, the findings of which show that 75% of answerers know the efficiency of e-learning less than 5, in a ten-point scale (Rosenberg, 2006: P. 15).

Also he added that we should be optimistic as well.

Freund has suggested that main reasons for unsuccessful e-learning initiatives have been: lack of personalization, lack of collaboration and interactivity, and that e-learning has not been learner-oriented.

The results of another research show the significance of face-to-face interaction and conversation without any mediate for learners (Tinnerman, 2006).

Dryfus, in *On the Internet*, has suggested that an education with no face-to-face relations achieves three levels out of seven learning and developing levels. Other groups of research reveal the high amount of dropout of e-learning courses which is related to all problems and challenges of this kind of learning, such as its socio-cultural features. Statistics and estimations in this regard are very contemplative and indicate the weakness of socio-cultural base of such a learning.

Some estimations show that between 30 to 50 percent of those learners involved in distance learning drop out of learning before finishing the course (Moore & Kreasley, 1996).

Some other results reported by on-line education centers indicate that more than 50% of learners drop out, while only 10% among those participated in a class drop out of learning (Zielinski, 2000).

Increasing the internet speed and improving communicative tools are of events which have happened in the latest decade, and it seems improbable that this factor have an influence in improving the situations. A complicated complex of different factors affect on not being welcomed the e-learning courses, including five parameters introduced by Haddad (content, infrastructure, educational policy, etc.), but in view of this writer, socio-cultural factors are most important ones.

Arnold, in a study on UK higher education, has pointed out the matter of learners' becoming reclude and causing distance between them and the society. The sense of becoming a reclusive is high at the beginning of the course and decreases as the course goes by, like at the beginning of the course, the need for guidance is high and it decreases as time passes.



The possibility of this matter that learning is transferred without the socio-cultural components, will be difficult or even impossible. But should this phenomenon be observed in a pathological view or not, is a contemplative case. This matter, however, can largely affect the process of e-learning and its result (in a determinative manner).

Hadad & Draxlerd introduce five parameter of information and communication technology (ICT) for education: educational policy, approach, infrastructure, content, committed and trained personnel (human resources).

In view of this writer, these five parameters are not adequate, since in the absence of socio-cultural parameter (the proper socio-cultural grounds), the ICT development patterns in education may fail. For instance, in Iran, despite of experts and journalists' view, there is no bad situation regarding these five parameters, the official e-learning courses are not welcomed by the families and young people.

The theoretical pattern of Mc Loughlin on developing e-learning is inexpressive and imperfect. His pattern is a two-sided of coordination or tension, i.e., the application of information technology in education causes either coordination or tension. In our case study, i.e., Iranian higher education, using ICT is neither tension-creating nor causing complete coordination and match. Therefore, there should be other statuses (third status, forth status, etc.).

E-learning process has three main bases :Learners, electeronic tools and process,motivator factors.(Ebrahimzadeh,2006) Social and cultural aspects can act as a motivator or a disincentive factor. Sometimes this factors have the main role in e-learning success.

Some of the most recent Iranian studies on socio-cultural aspects of electronic learning are summarized in the following table:

Researcher	Year	Results
Larkian & et al	2010	In developing countries like Iran, there are different contextual socio-cultural features impacting electronic learning. These features are: high power distance index(PDI), high uncertainty avoidance index(UAI) and tendency to participate in group

		activities, to be teacher-centered, absolute obedience and great respect to top hierarchy officials, teaching and learning according to social and ethical standards, accordance of personal interests to group interests, tendency towards structured learning opportunities and ...
Qaeni & Abdolhaq	2009	The evaluation of preparedness to establish electronic learning in Iranian organizations is based on four types of factors: cultural, technical, structural, and human resource factors Cultural factors consist of: the culture of accepting new ideas, the culture of learning and attitude of electronic learning
Kanani, Shayan & Hasanzade	2009	Considering learner's motivation and attitude particularly: imagination of attraction, ease of work and responding to learner's needs in the system_ group work tendency, structured interaction with the professor and other learners_ creativity supporting studies
Miladi, Chizari & Malekmohammadi	2009	There is a significant and positive relationship between the students' electronic learning limitations, their attitude and the possibility of using electronic learning
Nasiri & Fathi	2009	The establishment of an electronic educational system requires an appropriate organizational culture
Ebrahimzade	2007	The reasons for delay in operating electronic learning system of Payam-e-Noor University of Iran are as follows: inattention to international pedagogical experiences and learning theories_

		lack of consideration in social, cultural and historical features and educational traditions of the country
Montazer	2007	Some of the researcher's recommended strategies to develop ICT of Iranian higher educational system accompanies with developments in technical infrastructure are: developing information literacy, changing the traditional performance of educational system. Further, these two strategies have cultural aspects.

In addition to mentioned surveys, the researcher discussed social and cultural aspects of electronic learning in Iranian higher education in interview sessions with focus groups consisting of higher education experts. These discussions focused on the main issue of the study which is the gap between infrastructures, policies and tendency of applicants and their families.

Results

The results indicated that the main reasons of families and applicants' little interest in electronic learning programs of universities are as follows:

- Lack of having scientific identity among students of virtual universities
- Lack of a feeling of "belonging to a group" among virtual students
- The continuance and dominance of oral and written culture over digital culture
- The feeling of a more social status in normal universities
- Considering electronic learning as a subordinate education not a main education
- Having doubts about validity of virtual universities' degrees
- Having unreal assumptions about different aspects of virtual universities

Other discussed points at the interview sessions are:

- The electronic climate of universities is not as encouraging as Campus climate

- **Learning from the teacher's behavior through face to face interaction**
- **Electronic climates are unstructured and disordered, and learning aims are lost**
- **Interactions in electronic climates are not deep and sustainable and do not respond to the emotional needs of the young students. Iranian culture is based on emotions and face to face relations**
- **Cultural differences and cultural ethnical identities are yet important for students**
- **Higher educational system of Iran is teacher-centered and network learning is not yet established. Respect for teacher is rooted in our traditional culture (power distance)**
- **Introversion and conservatism are preventive factors against using electronic learning**
- **The students incline to follow a single and consistent pattern; otherwise, they feel inequality and favoritism in the competition. Teaching is in line with competition for personal development.**
- **E-learning programs in higher education focus on the value added of the organization (university) rather than value added of individuals. The individuals' value added is not necessarily economic one. It may be of socio-cultural type, such as obtaining social dignity or social identity.**
- **The programs are merely done given the ability of media and the amount of content transfer. There is no attention to the usefulness of programs for the learners and society.**
- **The needs of learners may not be well identified and prioritized.**
- **The e-learning courses and programs are more concerned with internal management and communication rather than external usefulness and effectiveness.**
- **There is not more attention towards competition between official e-learning courses and other opportunities of learning. The education market becomes a diversified market, so the attractions should be taken into consideration besides abilities**

Conclusion

The present study indicates that social and cultural contexts and cognitive approaches have a significant role in developing and executing electronic learning even in the higher education climate of Iran. In the same way, qualitative results of mentioned discussions in focus groups are in line with the results of surveys and field studies. Finally, we should admit that the results of both research projects and focus groups confirm dominance of Constructivism

Theory in Iranian learning atmosphere. It means that Iranian learners follow modern technology and knowledge by using their previous perceptions and experiences and the main role of learning is played by the learners themselves (see Siemens: 2008). They involve their previous beliefs and experiences in their judgments about efficiency of electronic learning. It seems that in these conditions, a change in government and social policies from constructivism to communiticism and network learning (policies which go along with development in electronic learning) has priority over development of technical bases.

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