

Does E-learning Portal Add Value to Adult Learners?

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Abstract: E-learning is overtaking traditional teaching and learning environment in distance education program. The aim of this research is to investigate the advantages of the E-learning Portal towards adult learners who have enrolled their studies in, School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). How much have learners gain and benefitted from the portal in their studies? Data were collected from a sample of 1084 undergraduate learners from USM through questionnaire. The data revealed that the learners agreed that they gain from the portal. The mean collected from the survey is in the range from 3.60 to 3.96. Most learners agreed that E-learning Portal add value in their studies. Therefore first class facilities should be provided to adult learners in order to increase their studies thus enable them to perform well in their examination.

Key words: Adult learners, advantages of e-learning, distance education, e-learning

INTRODUCTION

Education has gained its wings to fly higher as it experiences a rapid change from traditional context to electronic learning (e-learning) environment. Prior studies demonstrated that teaching and learning are no longer restricted to traditional classrooms (McAllister and McAllister, 1996; Marold *et al.*, 2000; Zhang and Nunamaker, 2003; Wang *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, one of the way to address the need of education through technology-based is by e-learning whereby the internet technologies becomes the mode of delivery for enhancing teaching and learning environments. The e-learning policy is to promote lifelong learning and to improve human capital for those learners who are unable to access education through the conventional means. Distance education program had been the leading system for flexible and continuous learning as the learner's demands to update their knowledge while securing their career and supported by Mangan (2001), students are unmanageable to run off from their jobs for a full-time or on-campus program enrolment. In line with the study by Chai *et al.* (2009), latest development in distance education using e-learning has created, encourage, deliver and facilitated learning at anytime and anywhere with the usage of interactive technologies.

Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) introduced Distance Education (DE) program in year 1971 through the School of Distance Education (SDE), previously known as the Center of Off-campus studies to provide education opportunity for working adults. Through this education approaches, working adults can still remain in full time employment and at the same time able to undertake undergraduate courses. Thus the advancement

in technology merely telecommunication has changed the face of distance education by opening up the possibilities of personal and group interactions via virtual and widely used mode known as E-learning system. USM Distance Learning Programme has been using the E-learning Portal as medium for teaching and learning through a home-grown electronic portal in 2003 and followed by the migration into Moodle in 2005 (Ismail *et al.*, 2010).

E-learning: Teaching and learning via media technology has become a phenomenon in recent years as as there been an evolving taxonomy and definitions to describe e-learning such as Web-based learning, online learning, distributed learning, computer-assisted instruction, or Internet-based learning (Jorge, 2006) while Khan (2001) and Hassan (2007) added open/ flexible learning as one of it. Besides that Urdan *et al.* (2000) and Hassan (2007) confines E-learning as the delivery of learning by electronic media; internet, intranets, extranets, satellite broadcast, audio/video tape, interactive TV, and CD-ROM. On the other hand, Wentling *et al.* (2000) and Rosenberg (2001) mentioned in their research that the Internet technologies are used to deliver a broad array of solutions that enhance knowledge and performance is also defines as e-learning.

For a sustainable educational transaction in the electronic medium and cyberspace, higher education institutions need to establish an e-learning infrastructure that requires the development of a virtual learning environment, known as an E-learning Portal. This portal helps learners to access to education information and materials at any time, from any location, without having to enter a school building. With this portal, lecturers can spend less time on paperwork and more time teaching

while learners can benefit from a richer, more robust learning experience.

E-learning portal: E-learning Portal provides space that offers learners a place where they can search across a multitude of electronic resources which includes electronic books and many other useful links. Ismail *et al.* (2010) reported that portal was developed with the idea as a one stop centre for references for e-learning. The portal also allows learners and lecturers to communicate at any time. Once learners log in into the portal via password, the transaction will be tracked. Through portal, learners and lecturers can disseminate messages, announcement, notes, question and answer. It can provide integration of sources for searching for the location and delivery of the materials in any format, physical or digital. Murray (2003) states, institutions need to use portal because it provide highly useful tools that make it easier for learners to achieve their potential.

Advantages of E-learning: E-learning provides flexible learning opportunities to adult learners as reported by Petrides (2002), traditional face-to-face course might not help everyone to work in a collaborative group without rearranging their schedule but through online learning it is much easier. While another study signify that learners can discover the best technique that best fit the way they learn as online learning provides the ability to freely select from the menu of varied learning experiences (Chizmar and Walbert, 1999).

Prior studies conducted indicated that online learning is convenience. In Murphy and Collins (1997) study, participants stated that they participate in the online discussions during their convenient time in addition Poole (2000), found that students participate on the discussion-oriented online course at their convenient time and most of them access course materials from their computers at home as its being a convenient place to them. Besides those online learning enable learners to provide thoughtful and liable comments as per Petrides (2002), online participants have a tendency to think in-depth when responding in writing compared to verbal version on their subject matters.

In this context, Carl (1991) stated that e-courses offered through are easily scrutinize then traditional classrooms and further expressed that learners can utilise the e-mail to create communication with their community members consequently could lead to cost savings. Research studies further revealed that students-centred learning provide accessibility to course materials and just-in-time modes to measure and evaluate students' development (Dwyer *et al.*, 1995).

Nevertheless, there are studies contradicting to the advantages of the technologies aided learning. The dropout rates have been very high when comparing with

the traditional face-to-face learning environments (Oppenheimer, 1997; Kraut *et al.*, 1998; Phillips, 2001) thus online students may not be capable to decide their learning needs, anxiety and other pedagogical aspects of education (Larsen, 2002). Another weakness identified in online learning not everyone who benefits in terms of the flexibility of the delivery and learning (Devi, 2001; Kearsley, 2002).

Although several studies have been diversely pointed out on the advantages and disadvantages e-learning but there were few literatures focusing on the benefits of E-learning Portal. Hence, this study was conducted to fill the gap on matter regarding the values that adult learners of perceived from using the portal.

METHODOLOGY

This study was done to gauge the benefits that E-learning Portal provides to the adult learners in the School of Distance Education at Universiti Sains Malaysia. The research conducted in November 2008 yielded 1084 usable respondents namely adult learners from School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM).

Participants: Table 1 portrays respondents' demographic profile such as gender, age, ethnicity, courses, and places of internet access as well as frequency of use of E-learning Portal. It was expected that, female learners are more than male learners take part in this study. The data collected showed that among the respondents of distributed questionnaires, 579 of learners that equal to 53.1% were female and 508 of learners that equal to 46.9% were male.

The data in the Table 1 also illustrate that a huge number of the respondents are Malay which is in the amount of 760 persons, followed by Chinese which is 232 persons. There are 48 Indian and the rest which is 44 persons are from other ethnic group. The respondents who participated in this study are the learners from four different courses. Most of the respondents are from the Bachelor of Science background which is amount to 348 persons and contributes the higher respondents followed by Bachelor of Management which is 334 persons, Bachelor of Social Science, 316 persons and the rest which is 86 persons are from Bachelor of Art.

Instruments: The survey was constructed based on self-administrated questionnaire which was designed and authenticated by expertise from School of Distance Education. The questionnaire contain closed questionnaire which seeks the values that learners benefited while using E-learning Portal and were measured using five-point Likert scale with Point 1 as strongly disagree and point 5 as strongly agree. The questionnaires were distributed to adult learners of School of Distance Education, USM for

Table 1: Demographic data

Items		Frequencies	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	508	46.9
	Female	576	53.1
Age	20-29 years	447	41.2
	30-39 years	465	42.9
	40-49 years	149	13.8
	50 and above	23	2.1
Ethnic Group	Malay	760	70.1
	Chinese	232	21.4
	Indian	48	4.4
	Others	44	4.1
Courses	Bachelor of Science	348	32.1
	Bachelor of Art	86	7.9
	Bachelor of Social Science	316	29.2
	Bachelor of Management	334	30.8
Place of Internet Access	Home	934	86.2
	Office	932	86.0
	University	694	64.0
	Cyber Cafe	812	74.9
Frequency of use of E-Learning Portal	Never	33	3.0
	Not more than once per week	250	23.1
	At least once per week	428	39.5
	More than once per week	373	34.4

Table 2: Advantages of e-learning portal

Statement (N=1084)	Agree/Strongly Agree	Mean	S.D.
You can communicate with more students in one time	68.2%	3.90	0.851
Students and lecturers can communicate at the real time	61.9%	3.78	0.879
You can easy to get the new course material	64.2%	3.78	0.870
You can get the course material quickly	60.7%	3.74	0.892
You can link the outside sources by using the portal	51.1%	3.60	0.860
You can improve the competencies of using the computer	72.4%	3.92	0.782
You are encouraged to communicate among students	73.4%	3.95	0.788
You are encouraged to communicate with lecturers	73.1%	3.96	0.791
You are taught to become self-independent in your studies	73.9%	3.94	0.809
You can get the response efficiently when you pass up or receive assignment	68.2%	3.86	0.841

the 2007/2008 sessions. Data were collected from a sample of 1084 undergraduate learners from Bachelor of Science, Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Social Science and Bachelor of Management which was randomly selected during 3 weeks intensive class that represents the learners who have experienced using e-learning portal as well as accessed resources of e-learning content.

Data analysis: The questionnaire consisted of 2 parts which is Part A and Part B. Part A focused more on the respondent's demographic and personal background such as gender, age, types of courses, year of study, monthly income, marital status, current CGPA and others. This part has many questions because the learners who studying in School of Distance Education comes from wide range of background. Part B questions consisted of issues related to practice, advantages and usefulness of E-learning Portal. Questions related to level of communication among lectures and learners, availability of learning material, duration and feedback of learning material, communication related issues and usefulness of the portal. The data was analysed by using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 12.0. The frequency test was run to determine the distribution of the demographic variables and advantages of using E-learning Portal.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

On question related to advantages of E-learning Portal, all learners positively agreed with the statements asked in the questionnaire. This reflected the usefulness of E-learning Portal rather than the weakness of the portal to the adult learners.

Based on the Table 2, the survey shows that 68.2% of the learners agreed that the E-learning Portal helps them to communicate with more students at a time. Learners can communicate through the portal to discuss regarding their group assignments, group discussions and online chat among their peers. This is parallel with the findings by Duan *et al.*, (2010), e-learning encourages a new ways of teaching and learning by improved collaboration and interactivity among students by creating an interactive online atmosphere through computer mediated technologies. Fichten *et al.* (2006), also supported that e-learning allows them to work at their own pace which is to study at anywhere while easily communicate with their peers.

E-learning portal has also benefited the learners by enable learners to communicate with the lecturers at the real time. The results exhibited that 61.9% of the learners agreed that the portal seems to be an avenue to communicate with their lecturers at the real time even

though they are apart in locations. Since this study was done in adult learning in distance education program, whereby the learners do not meet their lecturers frequently but via this portal, they can communicate regarding their studies and get a fast feedback from their instructors. This is supported by Douglas and Der Vyver (2004), traditional face-to-face instructor-led education can be transform into e-learning environment that provides an alternatives approach for teaching and learning. In addition, according to Reid (1999), to provide opportunities for activities and interaction in both asynchronous and real time modes it can be integrated by a number of technologies.

As shown in the Table 2, the indicated 64.2% of the learners agreed that they easily get the new course material while 60.7% said noted that they receive the course materials fast and they can also link outside sources by using the portal (51.1%). The result is consistent with the finding by Fichten *et al.* (2006), learners benefits of the e-learning was the availability of online course materials and course notes that they can receive at anytime and anywhere. Prior studies by Chu *et al.* (1998), it is easier to update electronic materials than updating printed material while Chodorow (1998), mentioned in the study that learners can achieve their personal learning objectives as they have control over the content, learning cycle, pace of learning, time and media. Where else Jorge (2006), noted that digital content can be widely distributed to many users simultaneously by using internet technologies. According to Clark (2002), learners can flexibly pick from the large menu of media options to accommodate their diverse learning styles through multimedia e-learning. However the is a study by Wetzel *et al.* (1994), illustrated that there is slight or no difference in student performance between video instruction and face-to-face instruction.

Technically, the result shows that 72.4% of the learners agreed that they can improve the competencies of using the computer while using the portal. Study by Wang and Newlin (2002), signify that users with little computer self efficacy performed well in the asynchronous e-learning atmosphere when they received virtual response and confirmation from other study partners. Apart from that respondents also agreed their competencies of using computer improved because they need to explore how to make the portal useful to their studies and encouraged more discourse among students and lecturers.

The E-learning Portal has been the mode of communication between the learners with their peers and also their lecturers. The results shows that 73.4% of learners agreed that the portal encourage to communicate among their peers while 73.1% agreed that it encourage communication with their lecturers. Jorge (2006), stated in the study that e-learning provides synchronous delivery mode whereby the all learners receive information simultaneously and communicate directly with the other learners and as well as the instructor through teleconferencing, internet chat forums and instant messaging. Thus learners need to often communicate

with the peers to keep in touch regarding their group work and assignments. While learners need to correspond with their lecturers or instructors to keep track of their progress and whenever they need response from lecturers on any related problems with their studies using the portal. This is an effective and efficient way to have the bond between the groups since the adult learners are apart in location.

The survey shows that 73.9% of learners agreed that E-learning portal taught them to be self-independent learners during their studies. As reported by Candy *et al.* (1994), students can turn into active learners rather than mere passive recipients of teaching by computer-based education. Therefore active participation by the learners will assist them to learn efficiently. The result in Table 2 reflected learners (68.2%) agreed that they get an efficient response when they pass up or receive assignment from their lecturers/instructors. Finding from McGovern and Gray (2005), e-learning have benefited learners to systematize their resources and carry out their tasks such as sending out their tasks. Learners will receive an up-to-date information regarding feedback or marks for their assignments or tutorial and quizzes from their respective lecturers in a timely manner.

CONCLUSION

As the conclusion, most respondents agreed that E-learning Portal have so many advantages such as creating avenue to communicate with more learners at one time and anytime, easy access to course materials, using outside link the get resources, improve competencies of using computer, become self-independent in their studies, efficiently feedback and responses.

However, consideration should be given to issues such as the learners can easy to get the new course material; learners can get the course material quickly and also the usefulness of the link to outside sources by using the portal. This is because these three areas have lower mean value. This means that there are some actions need to be taken into consideration to provide better and useful portal to the learners. On top of that, to ensure excellent e-learning environment first class facilities must be provided for learners to study in all the distance learning school.

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