

eLearning a Potential Learning Solution for Rural India – A Critical Analysis

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Introduction

The concept of digital divide is quite prevalent between rural and urban India. When it comes to the availability of resources rural sector has always suffered. The single major difficulty was the cost factor. In a conference at IIT Delhi, our the then President Hon'ble APJ Abdul Kalam reiterated the fact that rural India must be provided five basic types of connectivity namely, Physical, Electronic, Knowledge, Social and Economic. By the very term Knowledge Connectivity he meant to say the propagation of digital education in rural India.

In a country like India, the school level education sector is split into three major segments – primary, secondary and higher secondary followed by higher education which goes in to graduation and above. Now with the passage of time there has been a shift in the Government decision in terms of spreading education in rural areas. The Government in different states has gone in to tie up with different private technology infrastructure companies to commence eLearning initiative in various parts of rural India like in the villages of Madhya Pradesh, Tamilnadu, Kerala etc. IDC forecasted that the eLearning market which was about \$7 billion in 2004, is likely to grow \$28 billion by 2008 with nearly 30% compounded annual growth rate. (TheE-learningBoomIsHere,2006)

The major focus of this initiative is to cater to the information needs of the people living in the villages. There are different people with different information needs. These portals provide a wide array of services starting from online domicile certificate, caste certificate to income certificate and other information. Among these related services one section is education or eLearning.

Assessment of Educational Needs in Rural India:

Schools in Urban & Rural India do have a difference in character. Urban schools do provide state of the art infrastructure, faculty resource whereas the schools in rural India lack every aspect of that. The first factor that appears towards assessing the educational needs of rural India i.e., the education must cover the vocational aspect of education (Concept Paper, 2004). The rationale behind the idea is to enable them utilize the natural resources with an academic perspective which is available in their area in order to make their living. There are certain areas where vocational training can be given like Small Scale food processing, Organic farming, Honey bee culture etc. It has been observed that cases of school dropout is more in rural India, one of the reason may be we try to impose the Urban school education model upon Rural sector which is totally a misfit.

Hence, we can assess that, in Rural India the educational need is guided by some basic principles of school education followed by vocational training. The need for vocational training may depend upon the availability of resources in that geographic region, i.e., pisciculture may be successful in river infested areas, honey bee culture may be successful in the forest areas etc.

Therefore, the question in front of us is –how eLearning concepts can facilitate in realizing this dream?

Corporate – Government Initiative:

Gramjyoti: A project by Ericsson, Ericsson has set up broadband network across 18 villages and 15 towns of Tamilnadu. (Ericsson, n.d.). The major objective of this project, as far as education in rural India is concerned, is to facilitate education using high speed internet bandwidth across these villages. Ericsson has setup community centers across these villages which are equipped with PCs and 3G mobile handsets and has deployed teachers at their Chennai office to deliver education through internet. (Gramjyoti, n.d.).

Gyandoot: It is an initiative taken by the Government of Madhya Pradesh. In this initiative intranet facilities have been set up to connect the rural cyber cafes (<http://gyandoot.nic.in>). The Gyandoot Samiti has been able to set up 32 kiosks in high schools and higher secondary schools of Dhar District. Through these kiosks the students are provided educational contents of class X & XII in client server architecture (E-Education, n.d.). Through this portal students can share data across email and also the question bank created by the experts. (IIM-A Report, 2002)

Byrraju Foundation: In the year 2004, Byrraju Foundation partnered with IBM India to convey the technology to the 142 villages of rural Andhra Pradesh across six districts of Guntur, Ranga Reddy, East & West Godavari, Hyderabad and Krishna. The name of the initiative is IBM Kid Smart Early Learning Programme. (Business Line, 2004)

AKSHYA, Kerala: Government of Kerala launched Project AKSHYA in 2002 to promote basic computer usage among rural masses. The project aimed to establish 5000 multi-purpose AKSHYA e-kendras across Kerala which are run by private entrepreneurs. (Current ICT Projects, n.d.)

AAROHI, Uttaranchal: Uttaranchal Government in partnership with Microsoft, Intel launched project AAROHI to provide basic computer education to all Government and Government aided schools from Class VI – XII. As of now 1206 Government and 281 aided schools have been covered. (Current ICT Projects, n.d.). Microsoft further wishes to enhance computer literacy in the states of Kerala and Uttaranchal by imparting computer education 80,000 teachers and 35 lakhs students. (Business Line, 2003)

Objective of the Study

- i. To understand the educational needs in rural India.
- ii. To understand how eLearning can be helpful to meet those needs in a better way than existing practice.

Methodology

The present study is based on data collected from various secondary sources like news papers, web sites, reports and research papers.

Analysis

Mostly the eLearning initiatives have been deployed so far, talks about the education at a basic level and is more traditional in nature. The way education has been dealt since ages, same practice is going on even in the eLearning era. Merely a change in medium has taken place without considering any change in pedagogy or delivery objective. Now the big question in front

of us – how could we orient the perspective of education for rural using eLearning so that it helps them to shape up their life?

The present models advocate more of delivery of study material which has been drafted to suit a particular curriculum requirement and with limited sharing of knowledge.

Proposed Model

The author proposes a layered model which will have career oriented vocational learning capsule. The strong character of this model would be

- Basic education till class X
- Vocational Training
- Focus group discussion across network
- Appreciation from competent authority

Rationale of the Proposed Model

Every model is proposed in order to fulfill certain objectives. This model tries to meet not only the educational objective but aims to focus at the future, so that a student today can be guided to build his/her career tomorrow.

- Basic education till class X*: This layer will fulfill the fundamental computational, linguistic and general awareness skill.
- Vocational Training*: This layer will follow the previous layer. Only after certain skills are acquired, students can be counseled and their potential can be evaluated. Further, this layer will act as an incentive because after the successful completion of this layer students can think forward to build their career.
- Focus group discussion across network*: In this layer students can share ideas across villages and exploit this layer to find out opportunities and new markets in the unexplored areas. (Mukherjee, 2007) This process can be facilitated through multimedia solutions. (Devi, 2006)
- Appreciation from competent authority*: This initiative must be supported by the competent authority like Zila Panchayat, District Administration, State or Central Govt. so that the students can find the initiative as a qualification of recognition subsequently the initiative may become popular.

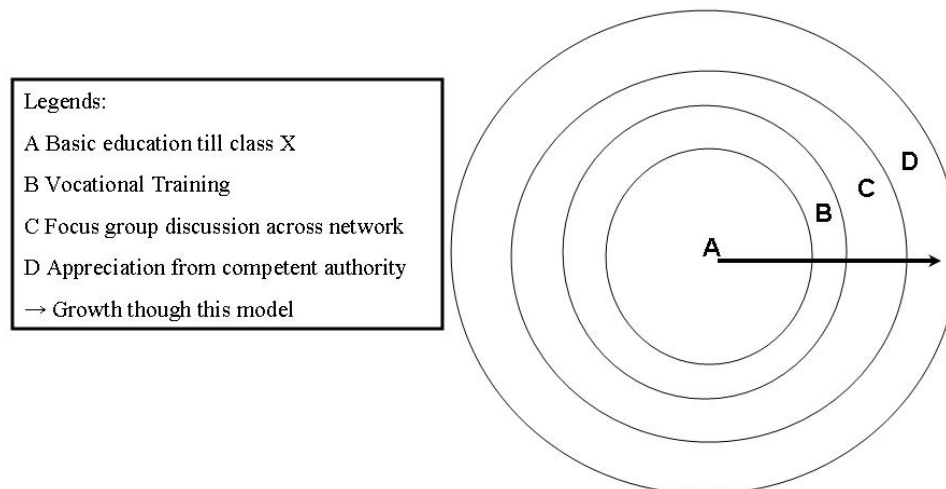


Fig. 1: eLearning Model for Rural India

Conclusion

There are eLearning initiatives taking place in Rural India from both corporate and Government sector. The author has proposed a model which is not only catering to their basic educational needs, but their need for career or future growth has also been taken care of. The time has come when we need to integrate the education and career option for the Rural India instead of segregating them.

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