

ENHANCING DISTANT LEARNING THROUGH EMAIL COMMUNICATION: A Case of BOU

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ABSTRACT

Today computer has replaced all means of traditional communication significantly. Many distant learning tools claim to be interactive, but few can offer two-way communication. 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, cell phone and Internet. We took this opportunity to investigate the prospective use of these tools for distant learning. The present survey has been carried out to understand the present status of Internet knowledge among the learners and their views for possible introduction of e-mail communication as supporting tool for learning. BOU's available infrastructural facilities for providing Internet support have been investigated. Furthermore, possible solutions have been pointed out to provide e-mail facility to the learner in a cost effective way.

Keywords: Email communication, Internet, cell phone, web based learning, tutorial center and Tutorial class.

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh Open University (BOU) has opened up a new era in distance education in the country. Prime objective of BOU is to transform the country's vast human resources into an educated and trained work force by offering formal and non-formal programs. BOU's 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 (Ali and et. al. 1997). At present BOU offers 21 formal programs. There are some prestigious and most popular programs, like MBA, B. Sc. in Nursing, Diploma in Computer Science and Application (DCSA), Bachelor of Agriculture Education (B.Ag.Ed.).

The average quality of learners admitted to these programs is good. BOU provides printed materials to the learners which are prepared in a self-learning style of distance education. The learning procedure also includes tutorial supported audio and video programs (Kirkwood, 1998). In reality, these are not enough for learners to complete the whole course successfully. Therefore, BOU arranges some face-to-face teaching classes called 'Tutorial class' (Ali and et. al., 1997) (Carswell and et. al, 2000) in the some tutorial centers outside the BOU main campus. Today computer has replaced all means of traditional communication significantly.

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. Email is the most popular means of communication medium now-a-days (Joshi and et. al., 2005). Therefore, it may be used as an educational tool for learning. In present socio-economic condition of Bangladesh, learners can afford computer, cell phone and Internet. We took this opportunity to investigate the prospective use of these tools for distant learning. The present survey has been carried out to understand the present status of Internet knowledge among the learners and their views for possible introduction of e-mail communication as supporting tool for learning. Authors have investigated BOU's available infrastructural facilities for providing Internet support. Furthermore, possible solutions have been pointed out to provide e-mail facility to the learner in a cost effective way.

OBJECTIVES

The survey is intended to address following issues,

- The Internet usage scenario among the learners
- Acceptance of e-mail communication as additional educational tool for learning

METHODOLOGY

BOU has at present 21 programs in various disciplines. We have selected 4 professional programs for our study, which are MBA, B.Sc. in Nursing, DCSA and B.Ag.Ed. All the programs were considered as the field of study. All the learners from above 4 programs were considered as the population. During the study 80% learners were available. A structured questionnaire was constructed for the learners of the said programs of BOU. The questionnaire has 2 separate parts in accordance with the objective and significance of the study. The questionnaire was prepared to know the opinions of the learners about assessing effectiveness and potentialities of email communication as educational tool for distant learning.

ANALYSIS

The quantitatively analyzed data 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.¹⁸¹

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

The Table-4 indicates the percentages of the Internet user among the learners of 4 different programs of BOU.

Table: 4
Program-wise Internet Users

Programs	Internet User (Computer or Cell Phone based) (%)
MBA	78
B.Sc. in Nursing	12
DCSA	81
B.Ag.Ed.	22

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Based on analysis and Interpretation, the 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our survey result of the present study we can conclude with some recommendations which are as follows;

- **BOU should establish an infrastructure with the communication link between main campus and RRC and LC for providing email and Internet communication for learning.**
- **BOU policy makers should take necessary steps to provide email and Internet facilities for the learners' at free of cost.**
- **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.**
- **To ensure more effective way of distant learning besides email communication, Web-based technologies should be incorporated.**
- **BOU may be offered computer and cell phone as additional tools besides of the existing tools for learning.**

CONCLUSION

The number of Computer and Cell phone user has increased significantly in Bangladesh over the past few years. Even though among the BOU learners there are also huge number of potential users of such kind of devices.

Therefore, BOU should take initiative to utilize the above tools as additional educational technology for distance learning.

Specially, based on the outcome of the present research BOU authority can build up an infrastructure of communication link and should introduce Web based learning in near future. Research on the possible inception of Web based learning in BOU is underway.

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