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A study on the Use and Scope of Whatsapp for Academic Activities among the teaching learning community

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Abstract: The impact of technology has reflected in changing the different facets of life including education. Today, a teacher is considered as a facilitator. Surprisingly, teachers have realized this role and started using technology to improve their role of facilitating. The objectives of this study are to find out how teachers and students use technology, especially WhatsApp as part of their academic activities, its advantages and disadvantages and the formats in which they exchange information. WhatsApp is a mobile messaging application which aims at providing simple, personal, real time messaging. Activity theory is used as the theoretical perspective. In-depth interviews and focus group interviews were conducted among the teachers and students who are very active in WhatsApp. It was found out that with the employment of WhatsApp, teaching became a continued process, extending out of the classroom. Teachers and students use this application for the immediate dissemination of important information. The interaction over WhatsApp helps the students and teachers to build better relationships between them. WhatsApp also has the advantage of saving energy, time, money and paper. However, there are also some disadvantages springing from the use of the application, such as SMS language creeping in to the formal writing habits of the students, the tendency to forget the correct spellings of the words and maintenance of decorum within the WhatsApp groups. Nevertheless, the application has proved to be a boon if it is used within certain limits.

Key words: Technology, Teaching, New media, education, WhatsApp

Introduction

The impact of technology has reflected in changing the different facets of life including education. Today, a teacher is considered as a facilitator. Surprisingly, teachers have realized this role and started using technology to improve their role of facilitating by making use of the new dimensions of technology. This study aims at how technology has facilitated the higher education system by analyzing the use of WhatsApp among the teachers and students with special reference to the use of WhatsApp.

WhatsApp is a mobile messaging application introduced by Brian Acton and Jan Koum in the year 2009 with an aim of enabling simple, personal and real time messaging (Jisha and Jebakumar, 2014). WhatsApp helps its users to stay connected with their online contacts. Online exchange of images, PDF files, audio and videos is also possible through WhatsApp. What makes it different and superior among other

medium is the connectivity and less cost. Ease of use and variety of options has made it a favourite to the society. Further, it made a rapid transformation in the way people communicate. People experienced a new way of information-sharing activity which opened up many virtual discussion platforms. The research says that WhatsApp groups have the potential to be used as tutorial complements. According to Susilo (2014), WhatsApp has pedagogical, social and technological affordances, which allow putting up announcements, sharing ideas and resources, and implementing online discussions. As it offer immediate and instant dissemination of information, WhatsApp act as a potential platform for the learners to share curriculum related news and information.

Review of Literature

Method of teaching has changed a lot after the introduction of information and communication technology. Virtual classrooms are no longer a strange experience for the students. The role of teacher is transformed to facilitator. With the use of social media, teaching and learning is exploring its new dimensions. Simple, personal and real time has become the key word of campus too.

Instant messengers available in the application markets are capable of transmitting a wide range of messages with no restrictions on message lengths and also allow users to share multimedia like videos, location, images, etc. All these services come at virtually no cost and one can avail this wide array of features for free simply by connecting the mobile device to the internet via data plans or WiFi connections. WhatsApp is the leader among the social networking by having 600 million users across the globe (Gudypaty and Jhala 2015). Bouhnik and Deshen (2014) define WhatsApp as ‘a smartphone application that operates on nearly all current types of devices and operating systems’. It was recently acquired by Facebook which has revised many features that WhatsApp already provides. WhatsApp synchronizes with the phone book of the user and allows him to send such message to any contacts that have the same application installed on their device. Bouhnik and Deshen (2014) say that the distinctive feature of WhatsApp is the option to create a group and to communicate within its boundaries. The creator of the group becomes its ‘Group Admin’, a position to manage adding and removing participants without the need for approval from the group members. All members in the group enjoy equal rights. The application enables the participants to receive an alert for each message sent or, alternatively, to mute the in-coming alerts for the duration of 8 hours, a day, or a whole week.

Mobile internet was not that popular among youth until the launch of WhatsApp application. As much as 90% of youth subscribe for mobile internet as the application works through internet access. As a means of sending and receiving messages to and from individuals or groups, WhatsApp includes a variety of functions, such as text messages, attached images, audio files, video files, and links to web addresses (Bouhnik and Deshen, 2014). Mobile providers ensure faster connection in their internet services and offer attractive and affordable schemes. WhatsApp has brought a boom for the mobile internet concept. After the arrival of WhatsApp, many youngsters who were not a user of mobile internet has shifted to the usage of 2G and 3G, thereby bringing a huge profit for the mobile service providers through their internet usage. The attractive offers that they provide attract even more youngsters to

make them avail 24/7 online. The speed that the internet packages offer retains the set of youngsters to be the regular users. After the entry of WhatsApp as a quick messenger, many of the youngsters started purchasing smart phones/android phones, this resulted in a huge sale for the smart phone industry. Many mobile companies started launching smart phones at affordable rates. This also enhanced the sale of smart phones.

Young people use WhatsApp to communicate with their family and friends. The various features available and the great speed in sending and receiving messages are added advantages of WhatsApp. Researches states that students remain online for 16 hours a day and spends an average of 5 hours per day on their smart phones interacting with others through social networking applications. Youth find WhatsApp as a platform to team up. Almost 70% of the students own smart phones and have started utilizing the full potential of smart phones (Tata Consultancy Services, 2013).

Jisha and Jebakumar(2014) says that majority of the youngsters remain online 24/7 to access WhatsApp, thereby getting in touch with their friends without missing any single message. All the respondents agreed that they use their mobile phone full time to access WhatsApp. 96 out of 100 respondents rated mobile as a necessity of their life in a scale of 1 to 5. Majority of youngsters use WhatsApp to chat with friends followed by relatives. Majority of the youngsters agreed that they converse with more than 15 people a day through WhatsApp. Majority of respondents rated 5 on a 5 point scale for the features of WhatsApp like instant messaging, group texting and updating profile image and status on a regular basis. The usage of unlimited audio files and video files were given 3 on 5 point scale. The youth consider it as a perfect tool for intimate social relationship, update their status, and exchange their photos and videos. Many of them use it as a stress relief tool also.

Use of WhatsApp for educational purpose started recently when the students identified the scope of the medium especially during the examination time. Quick group communication was boon to them as it could overcome the limitation of physical mobility for group study. However it took some time for the teachers to try this medium as an extension of their teaching activity. Tennyson (2010) saysthat the integration of the media artefact by the tutor or teacher in an e-learning system was the technological factor that improved online social interaction among group members in learning communities. According to Bouhnik and Deshen, (2014), WhatsApp's groups were oriented to at least four goals: communicating with students, grooming a positive atmosphere and a sense of belonging in the class, creating a dialogue, using and sharing a learning platform. The usefulness and ease of use are the major factors influencing students' participation and adoption of online interaction (Litchfield et al, 2007).

Educational mobile tools have a great potential to help students construct and share information and knowledge for learning through computers or mobile devices (Pence, 2007). Preston and colleagues (2010) found that nearly 70% of students state that they learn just as well in online learning communities such as WhatsApp groups, Facebook communities, Twitter chats and Google+ communities, as they do in

lectures that are held in the classroom in the presence of other students. Kadirire (2009) defines m-learning as ‘a form or an extension of e-Learning, which can take place anytime, anywhere with the help of a mobile communication device such as a mobile phone, iPod or any such small portable device’. M-learning is any sort of learning that happens when the learner is not at a fixed, predetermined location, or learning opportunities offered by mobile technologies (O’ Malley et al, 2003). Individuals are found as more productive when consuming, interacting with, or creating information, mediating through a compact digital portable device that the individual carries on a regular basis, has reliable connectivity, and fits in a pocket or purse (Wexler et al, 2008). Individuals who are engaged in a working group believe that their needs can be satisfied through working cooperatively and collaboratively as a community (Rovai, 2002).

Mercier and Higgins (2013) examined the adoption of online cooperative and collaborative learning strategies in online communities to support mathematics learning activities and found that a number of factors influencing students’ participation in cooperative and collaborative communities. Students are motivated and positively oriented to participate in online communities to share knowledge related to courses. The social presence of students in online communities is a pertinent factor that influences student’s participation in those communities (Cheung et al, 2008).

However, there are some drawbacks too. Yeboah and Ewur (2014) found that the usage of WhatsApp has impacted negatively on the performance of students in Ghana. High use of WhatsApp lead the students to lack of concentration, lack of productive time and it also results in destroying their interest towards studying and other physical activities. This is where the transformation of WhatsApp as a tool for education finds its new dimensions. However, there has not been a concrete study with respect to its use for knowledge transfer between teachers and students in college level. This research tries to find out the usefulness of WhatsApp in the communication between teachers and students at college levels. This will help to bridge the research gap that exists with regard to use of this particular application which is extensively used by students and various reasons leading to its popularity. The study will also try to throw light on the advantages as well as the disadvantages that springs from the use of this application in this respect. The objectives of this study are;

- To understand the use of WhatsApp for information exchange among students and teachers.
- To find the benefits of using WhatsApp for educational purposes.
- To identify the format in which maximum knowledge transfer occurs (images, videos or text)
- To understand the challenges / limitation of using WhatsApp for educational purpose.

Theoretical Perspective

Vygotsky’s Activity theory is used as the theoretical framework for this present study. It emphasises that learning through virtual discussion platforms features involving the learners, an object (the task or activity) and tool or mediating artefacts

and human behaviour is situated within a social context that influences their actions (Vygotsky,1987).Activity theory is suitable for this research as it analyse the use of an online platform by teachers and students and also their involvement in the same.

Methodology

Qualitative research approach has been used to identify the usefulness of WhatsApp in teaching processes. A case study was conducted among the teachers and students in Madras Christian College, who uses Whatapp for educational purpose. A sample of 14 teachers was selected using snowball sampling method. All these teachers use WhatsApp group through which they communicate with their students. Also, a focus group discussion was conducted among the students who are part of the WhatsApp groups in which the teachers interviewed are involved. Students from multiple disciplines took part in the discussion.The interviews lasted from 10 minutes to half an hour, while the focus group lasted for 20 minutes. The samples were asked to respond to nine pre-prepared questions. However, in course of the conversation, additional questions were asked to keep the respondents on track and to obtain more clear answers from the interviewees.

Findings

This research is done as an extension of an already conducted research, “WhatsApp Goes to School: Mobile Instant Messaging between Teachers and Students” by Bouhnik and MorDeshen (2014) of Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel. However, this is an attempt to find out the popularity and usefulness of the application in the higher education in India. Such a difference has its own importance in the very first sight in the sense that college students have more access to smartphones and WhatsApp than school students. Also, college students have higher level of maturity which determines the way in which they behave in virtual discussion platforms. As a result of these and many other factors, this research is bound to have results that are very much different from the results of the research by Bouhnik and Deshen.

All the teachers who were interviewed for the present study, uses WhatsApp to communicate with their students regarding educational purposes, but with varying degrees of involvement. Although theseWhatsApp groups were formed only mainly to pass on information related to the curriculum, all the interviewees agreed that the use of WhatsApp brought out greater positive results than they thought. There number of participants in these WhatsApp groups varied and also, in some groups, students from different departments were present.

The major findings are,

- Teachers and students exploit the technology of WhatsApp to its advantage to use it for teaching purposes.The teachers use WhatsApp to exchange immediate information to the students, mostly information like the time tables, the curriculum, important announcements, the attendance status, etc. and also to clarify doubts. Some teachers use the application to manage certain groups like the reading groups. However, one among the teachers goes a step further to use the application to conduct examination.The teachers attribute to the

connectivity, low cost and easy accessibility of the application for it being employed in the teaching process. Teachers and students often indulge in long discussions over topics with in the WhatsApp group. However, it is to be noted that the discussions are not confined to the group, but they are carried on to the classroom.

- The teachers stressed upon the time, energy and paper-saving factors of the application. The students need not wait to meet the teachers the next day to get their doubts clarified. It is also easy to communicate with students over WhatsApp. It is very handy and WhatsApp is a platform where everyone is present. Even students who are little introvert in the class find it easier to communicate with other students and teachers over WhatsApp. Such an interaction later leads to better relationship between teachers and students. In case of certain class groups where students from different departments are involved, there is always a tendency for the students of same department to stick with themselves and to refrain from communicating with the students of other departments. In such scenarios, teachers encourage the discussion between the students of different departments over a common WhatsApp group. If it was not for such a set-up, students would take up more time to develop a rapport among them.
- Texts, images, videos, voice notes and links are employed within the interaction between teachers and students. Some of the teachers prefer to text, while some of the teachers use voice texts instead of texting where they have to type out long messages. Voice-notes help the senders and receivers feel as if they are indulging a real conversation. Videos and images related to the topics under discussion in the class are sent through WhatsApp. Students circulate among themselves the images of notes while teachers mostly send the images of the important announcements that they receive which are mostly in the form of hardcopy. They participants in WhatsApp groups also send links to websites or videos which are of common importance. With the latest version of WhatsApp it is also possible to send documents; however, it is not so widely used by the teachers or students.
- It was teachers who mainly noted out the disadvantages of the employment of the smartphone application in teaching process. They pointed out that there is a lack of decorum within the WhatsApp group. At times one or two students indulge in long chats which could be done within a private thread. Although there is the option to mute the group in order to avoid the phone from beeping with every message, most of the teachers pointed out this as one of the major disadvantages. Also, there is the issue of spam. Some students forward messages which are of no use to anyone. The timing of the messages is also an issue, when the students keep on chatting over the group even late during night. Sometimes, students also fight over the group, a situation in which the teachers have to take up the role of peacemakers. The students mentioned that

WhatsApp tends the students to bunk the classes more for the reason that even if they are not present in the class, they will come to know about the developments through the group. Also, they will get the notes through WhatsApp even if they are absent. Another issue with the employment of such a virtual medium in education is that there are still some students who cannot afford a smartphone in order to access WhatsApp. Hence special care has to be taken to ensure that every student is informed about the announcements made in the WhatsApp group.

Conclusion

Like any other social networking platforms, WhatsApp was also mainly used for the purpose of entertainment and socialisation to a great extent. People socialise over WhatsApp, get connected with their dear ones who are miles apart. The application was also used for the immediate exchange of important information. The users found great amusement in sharing pictures and videos over WhatsApp. The greater deal of privacy that comes with WhatsApp over Facebook and other similar platforms made the users feel comfortable sharing their private moments only with handpicked audience. We saw lots of videos and images and forward texts being shared through WhatsApp. A great deal of discussion takes place over WhatsApp groups. Groups were created among family members, friends, colleagues and so on. Some companies even used WhatsApp groups to educate their novice workers. At times, people meet over WhatsApp groups, the kind of groups which serve their mutual purposes. However, rarely it was being employed in the field of education. This may be, to some reason that not all students are able to have smartphones or that students or teachers or even parents were sceptical about the use of smartphones and applications for educational purposes. However, this research shows that something that is only used for entertainment or similar mundane activities could be used for better causes. Teachers found out that WhatsApp is where all their students are available and to which they pay attention to and hence it could be used to connect with the student circle in an easier manner. In this way, the application and its use have attained a better meaning.

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