Experience of Virtual Interaction Amongst MBA Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the experience of interaction among MBA students in virtual environment and the causes behind incompetency in their practical skills. Post-COVID, virtual interaction has been continued by most universities and institutes completely. This practice has caused students inability to learn hard skills that are inevitable in the professional sector. MBA students are potential entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs that form a backbone of country's economy. This article follows a phenomenological research method under which in-depth interviews were conducted to understand their experience regarding virtual interaction. Two interviews have been conducted with the MBA working professionals to understand their experience. The major finding of this study is that virtual interaction has not been effective especially for the students who are obligated to develop hard skills predominantly. Regarding implications, this research helps the policy makers to understand the repercussions of virtual interaction. Streams that require practical skills should not follow virtual interaction, however, in need, hybrid mode could be implemented.

Introduction

Virtual interaction refers to communication, collaboration, and engagement where there is involvement of ICT tools. Dung (2020) introduces virtual interaction as a method in an online environment where there is discussion and collaboration within the students as well as with the teacher. It is implemented irrespective of geographical boundaries, time and space. Generally, different video conferencing tools are in practice to facilitate virtual interaction. Synonymously, it is also known as e-interaction

(electronic interaction) where the transfer of knowledge happens over an online or e-environment (Bri et al., 2009).

The concept of virtual interaction is comprehensive. Although most of us assume it only as a simultaneous or real-time online interaction over an application or software or a portal, it also includes several other parameters. Broadly, there are three types of interactions in an online environment, i.e., asynchronous, synchronous and hybrid (Dung, 2020).

To begin with asynchronous online leaning, as the name suggests, it does not take place in real-time. In this method, students are supposed to be self-directed focusing on assignments and completion of a course within a time frame. There is no such concrete meeting time or a class schedule; the interaction happens over an email, blogs or forums. In addition, synchronous online interaction involves interaction of a teacher and a student simultaneously through audio and video in a virtual interface which is basically provided by a software.

Furthermore, the interaction method that combines both in-person and online interaction method is known as hybrid interaction. It is also interchangeably used as blended mode of interaction. Most of the universities and institutes are found to be following this method in higher education level. For instance, Graduate School of Education, TU follows blended mode in which interaction happens over video conferencing software like Teams and an in-person session is also conducted periodically, usually after the completion of major modules.

Virtual interaction became an immediate need as soon as the country underwent lockdown in March, 2020. We also observed the rapid surge of usage of video conferencing software like Zoom, Teams, Google Meets, and so forth during the pandemic that testifies the increasing trend of virtual interaction.

 Majority of the students have undergone virtual interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic. The experience has been surreal for me despite its contribution towards not breaking the interaction chain during the pandemic. I too can relate exponentially with this aspect and in this research, I will solicit to understand the experience of students, from the faculty of business. The issue is relevant to me as I underwent the experience as a student, lecturer, and a close observer in the corporate recruitment sector. Business is such a stream that has an equal proportion of both theoretical as well as practical subjects. For instance, an MBA program requires a student to undergo periodical presentation, seminars, learn

formatting skills, data analysis, communication skills, negotiation skills, decision-making skills and so forth. All these practical skills are quantified and ultimately graded.

Connecting to my experience of teaching students of MBA, BBA and BBS, the curriculum of these programs is predominantly centred on practicality rather than a theoretical approach. There have been several accusations regarding BBS that it only entails theoretical courses, the new curriculum as of 2079/80 has clearly defined strict guidelines to follow the teaching grid to enhance the pragmatic skills of students as well. Therefore, virtual interaction is not feasible for students of business, be it any program, MBA, BBA or BBS. However, MBA students are the immediate potential professionals in the market and are supposed to be accustomed to robust level of interaction skills.

Despite its adversities, virtual interaction has become one of the effective methods concerning the current practices prevailing amid university and educational institutions. Although it has been in practice for a decade now, we can observe a dramatic surge in virtual interaction after COVID-19 pandemic. The use of ICT has been effective while conducting classes via video conferencing and other applications (Dillenbourg et al., 2002). However, there have been several issues as far as interaction via an online environment is concerned, especially, to the students who are supposed to have pragmatic practice.

In relevance to the objectives of the study, the following research questions have been formatted. They are:

How MBA students experience virtual interaction?

How do MBA students who interacted in virtual medium understand practical skills?

There are following objectives that has been determined to study in this research. They are:

To understand the experience of MBA students regarding virtual interaction

To examine the causes behind incompetency of MBA students in practice

This study helps to explore the experiences and perception of students who are studying business in a virtual environment. As virtual interaction is a growing trend amongst the institutions, it has several strings attached as well. Earning a degree is not only an achievement, rather the translation of the learned knowledge into a substantial form is necessary. This study finds out how the virtual interaction

affects the competency of the MBA students that ultimately helps to rectify the errors. Also, it helps the professionals who are striving to solve this growing academic issue.

Problem Statement

The graduate students who recently moved to a corporate or banks are found to be lacking the inevitable skills required in their daily work such as presentation, interpretation of data through analysis, portfolio analysis, security analysis, and other soft skills such as communication, negotiation and decision-making. Virtual interaction has not been instrumental when it comes to polishing their hard skills which is inevitable in professionalism (Ryan & Poole, 2019). Also, there have been very few studies done concerning virtual learning amid business students.

During recruitment, although candidates undergo a screening process based on their performance, projects, ECAs, and sometimes even alma mater, they are found extremely charismatic during their employment period but are not able to cater the same impression in practice. To be precise, there is a dramatic gap between what is projected in the CV and what they bring to the table. After constant deterioration in performance, they are interrogated so that the problem can be identified and necessary corrective action could be taken. Most of the candidates whose performance was not that good were claiming because of the apprehension they encountered during their employment.

For instance, they learned sales and marketing during their study. They are also well-known for the theories, principles and aspects that are done around business industries. However, because of a lack of exposure in practice, they were anxious to face the clients. Generally, in the physical mode of learning, the MBA students are asked to build their product, form a marketing slogan, promote it and sell it to the customers (Snyder & Snyder, 2008). They are supposed to make it as appealing as they can. This sort of mock session makes them prepared for the business market. However, virtual learning could not justify this skill.

Concerning the research done in this particular domain of virtual interaction, there have been several studies already executed. However, experience of virtual interaction within specific domain, i.e., for MBA has not been identified exactly. Other studies are generic that encapsulate the experiences and perceptions of students from all streams. The gap is required to be bridged in the context of e-interaction as the concept itself has evolved in an exponential way (Augar et al., 2004).

Most of the studies have been done taking e-interaction into account. Although e-interaction and virtual interaction deem to be synonymous, it is not. E-interaction entails asynchronous mode of interaction where there is no requirement of teacher in real-time, whereas virtual interaction happens over a certain platform in real-time basis.

Literature Review

Virtual interaction has an immense contribution to students who want to continue their studies despite uncontrollable situations, that could be ecological or their boundaries (Dung, 2020). argues that virtual interaction is inevitable for those who cannot attend the classes physically because of such circumstances, maybe health, geography or other conditions.

The field of business is extremely rigorous concerning the practice and the interaction gained over a virtual platform is not sufficient alone (Mandell & Klein, 2009). They need to undergo practice so that hard skills could be built. Otherwise, there would be the chance of a generation of incompetent graduates in the market. Also, there is a high probability of unemployment. The virtual interaction could be instrumental but it will not meet the requirements of the rigorous professionalism.

The world of corporate is pragmatic enough as barely few theoretical concepts come into practice (Elmuti et al., 2005). There is an immense predominance of practical skills such as finance, audit, communication, and so forth. Lack of such skills has been found due to the complete practice of virtual interaction.

Virtual interaction having its specialty is a benefit, however, we should know that every benefit comes with some strings attached. The benefit is that the students can access the knowledge from anywhere irrespective of geographical proximity (Hay et al., 2004). The cons are that it will not contribute towards the holistic academic as well as professional development of a student. Rather, there is a high probability of downfall in their interpersonal and other hard skills.

For the students of MBA, it is crucial to have exposure of industry, commerce and trade (Chen et al., 2009). When it comes to MBA students, they are the immediate professionals in the field of business. There is a high anticipation from MBA students regarding their expertise which ultimately puts on a humongous amount of responsibility within them. The incessant exposure in virtual environment will lead towards incompetency because of lack of realistic approaches.

During recruitment, although candidates undergo a screening process based on their alma mater, projects and ECAs, there is a dramatic gap between what is projected in the CV and what they bring to the table (Weinberg et al., 2011). After constant deterioration in performance, they are interrogated so that the problem can be identified and necessary corrective action could be taken.

McGloin and Geogeou (2015) argues that most of the candidates whose performance is supposed to be good usually claim because of the apprehension they encountered during their employment. For instance, they learned sales and marketing during their study. They are also well-known for the theories, principles and things that are done around business industries. However, because of a lack of exposure in sales, they were anxious to face the clients. Generally, in the physical mode of polishing sales skills, the students are asked to build their product, form a marketing slogan, promote it and sell it to the customers (Snyder & Snyder, 2008). They are supposed to make it as appealing as they can. This sort of mock selling session makes them prepared for the business market. However, virtual interaction could not justify this skill.

Research Design and Methods

This paper follows a phenomenological research method under which in-depth interviews were conducted to understand their experience regarding virtual interaction. The number of interviews that were taken while undergoing this research was two as both of them are well-accustomed to virtual interaction during their MBA program in Kathmandu.

During the in-depth interviews, one participant was an MBA student who is currently undergoing his study via virtual interaction. Another participant is an MBA graduate who underwent her degree in a virtual medium and currently working for a bank. Along with this, several case studies on the virtual interaction, the history of virtual learning in Nepal, and perceptions were studied as a part of secondary data collection method.

After taking an interview with the student from MBA, I underwent transcription and coded the interview extract into 11 different codes. After coding, I enlisted all these codes and collated them into different groups. After collation, certain themes were generated such as, "anxiety in front of classmates", "confusion during interpretation", "fear of feedback", "lack of vigilance during idea convey", and "irrational fear of arithmetic interpretation". To represent the accuracy of the data and its usefulness, I

split, discarded and combined the relevant ones and redefined a new theme as "Ambiguity in Presenting".

After conducting an interview with an MBA graduate who is currently a working professional for a bank, I underwent transcription and coded the interview extract into 9 different codes. After coding, I enlisted all these codes and collated them into different groups. After collation, certain themes were generated such as, "skills help than marks", "beyond the expectation", "employability disrupt", and "career threat". To represent the accuracy of the data and its usefulness, I split, discarded and combined the relevant ones and redefined a new theme as "Grades are no Longer Helpful".

To facilitate any research, there needs to be a requirement for data. Without data, it is almost not possible to determine outcomes (Wang et al., 1995). There is a plethora of significances of data in research as data helps in making decisions. As we know that the ultimate objective of any research is to identify or explore the problem and its reasons, it would help to solve the problem as well. The researcher won't solve them but it would generate outcomes for others. Also, we know that the identification of a problem is half of the solution in itself.

Data helps in understanding the subject matter and is instrumental when it comes to improving overall procedures in research. It is always beneficial to streamline the methodologies and fulfilling the requirements.

Results

To present the results in a concise manner, two themes are created, one for an incumbent MBA student and another for MBA graduate who currently is a professional. This creation of theme becomes instrumental in properly interpreting the data. It is because one participant has concerns around the incumbent scenario going on as he is currently a student and another participant have concerns about the impact of virtual interaction in career as she is currently a professional. It is demonstrated as follows.

Ambiguity in Presenting

Virtual interaction has continued in colleges despite the end of the pandemic. Students who are supposed to learn technical skills are not able to leverage as much as they can in a physical learning mode. In this context, an MBA student has shared his experience: "I always get confused while interacting with people in person. Although I have completed several assignments that require presentation and

interpretation of ideas, it is difficult for me to do the same in a physical format". From this statement, we can evaluate that students who present their ideas properly in an online platform tend to get extremely anxious and nervous while presenting the same thing in a physical mode. Analyzing the attendance sheet of students who were supposed to present on the presentation day, most of them were found to be absent. After asking the reason behind absenteeism, the MBA program coordinator disclosed, "Students are not used to confronting the class, most of their courses were completed online because of which they are reluctant to be present".

Presentation anxiety is one of the prevalent problems amid university students (Eliot & Chong, 2005). Colleges running their courses with the primary objective of bragging profits out of the students and not focusing on their hard skills is saddening situation in the education system of Nepal.

Grades Are no Longer Helpful

Virtual interaction has helped students to obtain good grades because of the flexibility but it is considered no longer instrumental. MBA is such a level that requires practical exposure, research-based learning, discussions, and indulgence of case studies which would contribute to building problem-solving skills. The students are compelled to mug up and cram up the answers as the question blatantly discourages critical thinking skills. In this context, an MBA graduate has shared her experience: "I can confirm that grades are only a yardstick to let the organizations know that the individual is worth joining. When it comes to practice, from day one, hard skills come into action which we did not learn in virtual class. For example, we are asked to meet clients and undergo competitor analysis, portfolio analysis, and profit-loss evaluation which usually require technical skill. We were not taught these sorts of skills during virtual learning sessions back in college. It has caused a lot of trouble for me". This statement denotes that virtual learning has not been helpful for graduates who recently moved to a profession. Despite having good grades, they are not able to show the same level of performance in their career. Analyzing the appraisal ratio of students who secured a 3.7+ GPA, the majority of them were not promoted in their first year of employment. After asking the reason behind this, the HR head of the organization said: "I have found a major gap between what is projected in the CV and what the candidate actually brings to the table. Most of the graduates are hesitant to act sincerely and prefer to Work from Home which is not possible in a corporation like ours".

The transition in learning that graduates underwent during COVID got prolonged which has become an obstruction to learn hard skills (Fitzgerald & Konrad, 2021). In the generation where hard skills are most valued, the growing number of graduates that lack skill in an adversity on the way.

Discussion

With respect to the results obtained after having an interview with the participants, I would like to support my arguments critically with the help of existing literature. From the results, we can interpret that the participants argue around the fact that virtual learning discourages constructivist approach and critical thinking.

To begin with constructivism, despite it being an effective form of pedagogy, there could be difficulties while evaluating the student even in the form of physical learning. Also, there could be issues concerning resource limitations, and majorly in a country like Nepal, where we struggle to find good teachers, it is not that conventional. Constructivism is not only limited to human resources but also spreads to other aspects. For instance, to make the interaction more engaging, we need to have resources, which could be technological tools that might not be available everywhere. Also, it is a time-consuming process as rigorous planning and preparation is required (Lamichhane & Wagley, 2008).

As per the participants, we can barely see the practice of critical pedagogy in virtual learning and interaction is the bare minimum. However, even in the physical form of learning, only a few foreign-affiliated colleges are seen to be adopting critical pedagogy as they can afford the sophisticated academic setting and infrastructure.

Personally, what I introspect is that every individual could have their conviction and as a matter of fact, we shall be focusing on subjectivity in critical pedagogy. We know every opinion varies, and chances are there could be deviations in the arguments and misinterpretations as well. This is because we still lack knowledge regarding constructive feedback and handling criticisms. There are several instances where the feedback has resulted in a backfire instead.

Addressing the first research objective based on the results obtained, we know that the COVID-19 pandemic became the prime time of virtual interaction in Nepal although other countries have been practising it for nearly a decade. Almost all schools, colleges and universities underwent virtual interaction during the pandemic. The thing is, this continued even after the pandemic has ended.

Colleges saw it as an opportunity to cut running costs and some decided to continue virtual interaction, completely. This is where the problem started.

For the student's MBA, virtual learning has not been effective as discussed in Theme 1. The experience is not progressive because they do know that interacting in a virtual medium will not contribute to developing their leadership skills which is inevitable in their professional career.

Addressing the second research objective based on the results, as we know through the second theme that the MBA graduate, who is now professional has observed grades are not instrumental in their career anymore. It is just an entry requirement that becomes obsolete from the day an employee starts to work. It is true and adding my value to this notion, my experience as an International Business Officer for a corporate where responsibilities were around managing the supply chain and export of the company, the second research objective comes into account. The company underwent massive employment for their new vertical in 2022. As a close observer, I found a lack of skills amongst the MBA students as they were facilitated in a virtual medium which caused them to lose their job opportunities. This might sound eccentric, but the rigorous corporate sector incessantly requires candidates who have a strong command over communication and other hard skills which is not possible to fulfil from the virtual interaction.

Conclusion

The practice of virtual interaction has left more room for the claims now. Streams that require practical skills should not be following virtual interaction completely as it has adverse effects. Ultimately, this practice makes MBA students remain skillless which has a potential chance of giving rise to unemployment. In this research, I have been able to understand the experience of MBA students who are undergoing their studies in a virtual platform as well as the perception of professionals who underwent virtual interaction. In a nutshell, virtual interaction is not effective especially for the students who are obligated to develop hard skills predominantly.

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