

Beyond the Classroom Through the Paperless Mode

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: January 01, 2019

Accepted: January 28, 2020

Published: January 31, 2020

Volume: 3

Issue: 1

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2020.3.1.9

KEYWORDS

Paperless classroom, textbooks, digital mode, engagement theory, 21st-century skills, collaboration, teamwork, distance learning, corporate culture

ABSTRACT

The development of technology in the modern world has necessitated the evolution of paperless classrooms. However, the transformation of educational technology and educational resources has not been able to keep pace with the growth of digital technology that we witnessed in the employment sector. Even today, textbooks and notebooks are widely used as primary teaching and learning tools in many universities across the Arabian Peninsula. The academic community has been making conscious moves to migrate into paperless classrooms in many higher education institutions across Oman through the increased application of computer and internet technology for instructional purposes. The digital mode of instruction can be considered as a conscious attempt to prepare and equip the learners for the paperless digital era. The theory and practice of paperless classrooms are analyzed critically in the first part. The second part of the paper is more specifically an observational analysis of the undergraduate students of Dhofar University and their engagement with digital devices in the classroom. The present educational scenario in the Arabian Peninsula in general and Dhofar University in particular demand a serious study of the concept of paperless classrooms to equip the students to look beyond the classrooms into the challenging avenues of employment opportunities. This study is an attempt to critically examine the paperless mode of education in Oman with special reference to the learners of English at Dhofar University, Salalah, Oman. The study finds that paperless classrooms are more dynamic, engaging and productive that will enable learners not only to develop autonomous learning, data collection and analysis, collaboration and teamwork in the classroom but also delimiting the geographical and time restrictions. Paperless classrooms equip learners with the technological skills that are in demand in the 21st-century for employability, e-business and eCommerce.

Introduction

The relevance and practical implications of a paperless classroom in contemporary life are defined elaborately by David Doherty (2012) in his book "Beyond the paperless classroom". According to him, the paperless classroom is not just one where the pen and paper are replaced by digital text. It is a place where twenty-first-century technology tools enhance communication, help students stay organized through collaborative and creative classroom experiences. It is a place where students learn technical skills that will prepare them effectively for twenty-first-century life. In the words of Ferguson (2017), the engagement and motivation of students in their learning activity are very high in paperless classrooms. As a result, there will be an increased learning outcome because of the active participation of all students. Similarly, Watfa and Audi (2017) believe that continuous or any time contact made possible through the internet and the real-time feedback between learners and teachers will enhance the learning outcome. The paperless classrooms are very eco-friendly because it will save our trees from being cut down for making paper. Moreover, it will keep the classrooms free from unwanted and torn papers being littered around. Therefore, the paperless classrooms can be considered as a great initiative towards the conservation of nature.

The digitalization of education and educational resources can be considered to be the direct consequence of the rapid technological development of our times. Even today, textbooks and notebooks are widely used as the primary teaching and learning tools in many universities across the Arabian Peninsula. The academic community has been making conscious moves to migrate into paperless classrooms in many higher education institutions across Oman through the increased application of computer and internet technology for instructional purposes in the classroom.

The concept of a paperless classroom is advocated by numerous educational experts today because of the relevance and application of information technology in contemporary social realities. Therefore, the application of digital technology has become a need and necessity in today's educational scenario. In paperless classroom teachers and learner cannot use textbooks and notebooks for instructional purposes. They can use only computers, laptops, iPads or any other technological devices agreed upon by the authorities and stakeholders. All the examinations, assignments, quizzes, tests, and even grading should be done without the aid of pen and paper. All the activities related to the educational requirement should be done electronically. Therefore, there is a complete dependence on electronic devices for all educational activity. In such classrooms, there is no physical exchange of information or learning materials between the teacher and the student but only an exchange of knowledge in virtual space (Slowinski, 2000).

The digital mode of instruction can be considered as a conscious attempt to prepare and equip learners for the digital era of paperless offices. The theory and practice of paperless classrooms are analyzed critically in the first part. The second part of the paper is more specifically an observational analysis of the undergraduate students of Dhofar University and their engagement with digital devices in the classroom. The present educational scenario in the Arabian Peninsula in general and Dhofar University in particular demand a serious study of the concept of paperless classrooms to equip the students to look beyond the classrooms into the challenging avenues of employment opportunities in this digital era.

Creating a Paperless Classroom

The first step in creating a paperless classroom is to ensure that there are adequate infrastructure and necessary digital devices. Secondly, educators should be knowledgeable about all the web tools that they are going to use in the class. In addition, they should be comfortable in using them properly and effectively in the classrooms. Moreover, many educators believe that an organized paperless education can enhance the learning outcome which will help students in preparing themselves for the practical world. The best way to set up a paperless classroom is to adopt a Learning Management Solutions (LMS). Another effective solution is to create a common Classroom Websites (edudemic, 2014). The teacher's competence in providing appropriate technological instruction to students is the primary factor in an efficient paperless classroom.

Apple Classroom, Apple Schoolwork, Microsoft Classroom, Moodle, Blackboard Learn and Google Classroom are some of the popular learning management solutions. Blackboard and Moodle are two popular platforms used by many educators. Dhofar university teachers make effective use of the Moodle platform for many of their teaching activities. The easiest option is to implement an LMS but many educators are keen on creating and designing their own website or a blog which can be done either by constructing a template or by setting up a blog platform. Many educators now use Google Classrooms which is very user-friendly. Some educators opt for Open Source Course Builder (OSCB) which can be set up and customized based on the requirements of the educator. The online platform is the base for all types of LMS for a paperless classroom. However, Google Classroom is the most popular LMS used by many educators today because it has multiple applications necessary for the smooth functioning of a paperless classroom.

The Transition to Paperless Classrooms in the Omani Context

The transition to paperless classrooms in Oman is progressing in a slow but a steady manner. However, most of the higher educational institutions in Oman have the necessary technological infrastructure necessary to move into the digital mode of education. A large number of teachers make effective use of technology in their instructional activities. The transformation of educational technology and educational resources has not kept pace with the growth of digital technology witnessed in the employment sector. Even today, textbooks and notebooks are widely used as the primary teaching and learning tools in many universities across the Arabian Peninsula. The academic community has been making conscious moves to migrate into paperless classrooms in many higher education institutions across Oman through the increased application of computer and internet technology for instructional purposes in the classroom. All the examinations and assessments are still carried out on paper except for information technology-related courses.

In paperless classroom teachers and learners do not use textbooks and notebooks for instructional purposes. They are required to use only computers, laptops, iPads or any other technological devices agreed upon by the authorities and stakeholders. All the examinations, assignments, quizzes, tests, and even grading should be done without the aid of pen and paper. All the activities related to the educational requirement should be done electronically. In such an educational set-up the textbooks and note-books are completely kept away from the class. A paperless classroom in this sense is not a reality in Oman yet. However, a number of students at Dhofar University very often exhibit certain essential elements of virtual classrooms. An observational analysis of their behaviour patterns showed that some of the basic concepts of a paperless classroom were practised unconsciously by these students.

It is very apt to recall a specific incident to vindicate the above observation by the author. The incident relates to the use of an electronic text without prior planning for instructional purpose in this author's class. It supported the postulate that many students in Dhofar university exhibit or show preference for paperless mode of instruction. When some boys came to the class without the textbook, the teacher instructed them to get the photocopy of the unit he is going to teach them. One of the students immediately suggested an alternative to the teacher. He said if you could use the LCD projector and display the lesson for the whole class, we need not waste time and money to bring a photocopy. The student informed the teacher that a digital copy of the text has been already uploaded in the system for instructional purpose in the listening activity class. Immediately, the teacher realized that this electronic text can be used for the reading activity as well. This was an exhilarating experience for all the students and for the teacher it was a fresh realization about the role of technology in enhancing the quality of education.

The shift into a digital mode of instruction necessitates a process of self-reflection, research and critical evaluation of the newly adopted method in the immediate classroom environment. The teachers are not only empowered by a critical self-evaluation of their newly adopted teaching practice but also through a detailed analysis of the learning outcome achieved from the digital or paperless mode of instruction. As teachers migrate gradually into the digital zone of education and educational technology learners will be equipped to look beyond the classrooms into the challenging world of opportunities in our digital era.

The concept of paperless classroom advocated by numerous educational experts has become very popular in today's educational scenario because of the relevance of information technology in contemporary social life. Therefore, the application of digital technology has become a need and necessity in today's educational scenario. In paperless classroom teachers and learner cannot use textbooks and notebooks for instructional purposes. They can use only computers, laptops, iPads or any other technological devices agreed upon by the authorities and stakeholders. All the examinations, assignments, quizzes, tests, and even grading should be done without the aid of pen and paper. All the activities related to the educational requirement should be done electronically. Therefore, there is a complete dependence on electronic devices for all educational activity. In such an educational set-up the textbooks and note-books are completely kept away from the class.

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Empowering Learners

The digital mode of education and educational resources has ushered in revolutionary changes in the field of education. The application of innovative technology in modern employment sectors also played a major role in this transition. Researchers have opined that younger students are more enthusiastic about using iPads and laptops than senior students. In the same way, boys show more interest than girls in using educational technology (Ferguson, 2017). Since paperless classrooms are learner-centred, they enhance the knowledge of learners through the internet as well as through peer interaction and group work. The teacher's ability to transfer appropriate technological skills to the student is another essential aspect of learner empowerment (Grigoryan & Babayan, 2015). According to Yuniatri (2014), a paperless classroom is an innovative system of learning and not just another process of learning. In short, it represents a dynamic paradigm of learning that equips the learner to face the challenges of life outside the classroom.

An important argument against the digitalization of teaching-learning methodology is that the new technologies are expensive. In addition, the predominant preoccupation of the learners with their digital devices has resulted in a serious lack of social skills among many learners. Some studies have pointed out that when online space becomes a more significant place for interaction, social anxiety rises due to reduced human interaction. Some studies have shown that students from paperless classrooms suffer from underdeveloped reading and writing skills. It is observed that excessive exposure to a digital screen can cause damage to the eyes and lack of writing skills can seriously hamper the dexterity of hands in addition to an over-dependence on digital devices.

Most of the above charges are successfully countered by the votaries of paperless classrooms. Many researchers agree that group assignments provide opportunities for human interactions in real as well as virtual space for all learners. Moreover, project work offers opportunities for building up human relations among learners with a common goal and objective. Some of the supporters of paperless classroom argue that reading skills and the skill of writing on paper can be promoted effectively by providing more opportunities in the social context. These habits can be consciously cultivated at a personal level and sometimes enhanced by social necessities of human interaction outside the academic realm.

Paperless classrooms and employability in the 21st century

The students acquire a number of digital skills from a paperless classroom. These skills will help students to develop real-life skills such as self-learning and collaboration with peer learners. Furthermore, such learning activity becomes

a real training ground for students to prepare themselves for their future life and career. This is due to the fact that many business establishments nowadays give priority to telecommuting, teamwork in information gathering and implementation of projects as part of the emerging corporate culture. The focus of work culture has undergone a change in many successful business establishments with the implementation of e-business. As a result, the new corporate culture gives more importance to faster achievement of targets and timely implementation of projects than the physical presence of the employee in the workplace.

The learner in a paperless classroom can have easy access to knowledge and skill advancement because of the flexibility in learning activity aided by the effective use of technology. Secondly, the acquired knowledge and skills can be stored and retrieved efficiently by a proper organization of information in a single portable digital device. Once the technological aspect of learning infrastructures such as the digital device and the uninterrupted access to the internet is ensured, learning is possible in any place and at any time. Therefore, a paperless classroom is an effective answer to the limitations of time and space (locational restriction) encountered in a traditional learning activity that insisted on the presence of the learner at a specific location. In short, learners can become more autonomous as technology enables them to take a more active and meaningful role in the learning process which ultimately contributed to the enjoyment of learning. Though there are some disadvantages such as underdeveloped social skills, there is a general consensus that the paperless classroom can provide students with tools and resources to help them stay organized and motivated which will equip them for their future life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one can say that students acquire a number of digital skills from a paperless classroom and these skills will eventually help them to develop real-life skills such as self-learning and collaboration with peer learners. Furthermore, such learning activity will become a real training ground for students to prepare themselves for their future life and career. This is due to the fact that many business establishments nowadays give priority to telecommuting, teamwork in information gathering and implementation of projects as part of the emerging corporate culture. The focus of today's work culture has undergone big changes in many successful business establishments with the implementation of e-business. As a result, the new corporate culture gives more importance to faster achievement of targets and timely implementation of projects than the physical presence of the employee in the workplace. Therefore, the appropriate use and application of digital technology have become a need and necessity in today's social life. Since teachers and learners use only computers, laptops, or technological devices for all learning activities, there is a complete dependence on electronic devices for all educational activity. This digital model of instruction can be considered as a conscious attempt to prepare and equip learners for the digital era of paperless offices.

Finally, as David Doherty (2012) says, the paperless classroom is not just one where the pen and paper are replaced by digital text. It is a place where twenty-first-century technology tools enhance communication, help students stay organized through

collaborative and creative classroom experiences. It is a place where students learn technical skills that will prepare them effectively for twenty-first-century life. The digital skills that the students acquire in the classes help them to develop real-life skills such as self-learning, information gathering, and collaboration with peer learners. Furthermore, such learning activity becomes a real training ground for students to prepare themselves for their future life and career. This is due to the fact that many business establishments nowadays give priority to telecommuting, teamwork in information gathering and implementation of projects as part of the emerging corporate culture.

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