

Injecting new life into online learning

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ONLINE learning has been adopted by corporations globally. It is considered to be an important medium for imparting training for their employees recognising factors such as ease of learning, costs involved and standardisation of content. Many organisations have invested millions of dollars in creating content with features such as gamification and simulations in order to motivate the learners. Despite all such efforts, the most cited criticism with online learning model have been linked with lack of personal touch, unidimensional experience and the loneliness factor in self learning.



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However, lately, technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) are emerging online format of learning and creating enthusiasm with the learners. Learning designers are excited with the possibilities of the near life like experiences that are possible to be provided with these technologies; thus motivate the learners to stay connected with their learning programmes and more importantly help them gain deep exposure to the subject matters of their interest. These technologies could provide the learners with the unique blended experience of seamlessly switching from offline to online and vice versa and actively participate in the learning process.

The immense possibilities for cruising through both the worlds is feasible to be embedded in the learning programmes with an imaginative design

and a well thought out pedagogy based on the requirements of the learners. The choice of AR or VR depends upon the context and the content that is required to be disseminated.

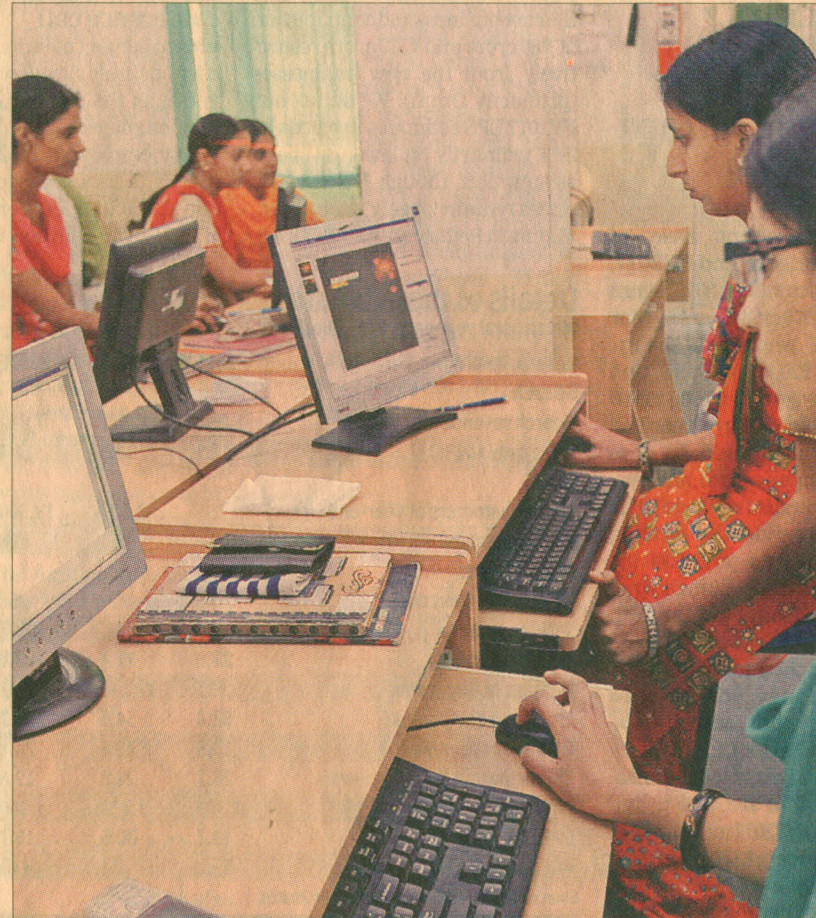
Let us take a look at how AR and VR can deliver a superior learning experience. Augmented reality augments or supplements the elements of the real world environment by computer generated sensory inputs such as sound, video, graphics or GPS data. AR is being deployed for creating near real life experience for consumers before purchase of products is made. For instance, if someone is interested in checking out how a piece of furniture will ap-

pear in a room in terms of colour match, aesthetics, dimensions etc, it is possible to do this with the help of AR app on the mobile by placing the mobile on the marker of the object.

On similar lines, in the context of imparting skills, AR can be immensely helpful in understanding the construct of a product or an environment clearly. In order to impart skills effectively, AR could be a useful medium as the learners could be encouraged to view the insides of equipments that have to be repaired or for whom maintenance work has to be carried on. Understanding human anatomy or working in complex environments or dealing with safety hazards leading to life threatening situations under the sea or mines and installing specific equipments at such places could be explained well with AR apps specially designed for this purpose. Learners

could interact with these objects and based on their interest areas could delve as required thus enabling them with an intimate understanding and close view of the subject matter which makes them feel close to the real world and prepares them for dealing with the situations that they are likely to face.

Virtual reality was something that was used to provide great multimedia experience for playing computer games. Designing VR applications and providing access to VR experience were both very expensive propositions. However with the costs involved having dropped considerably and ease of ac-



cess having improved substantially with ever enhancing capabilities of mobile devices, VR has found its way into the corporate learning domain and can be used to provide specialised training in a number of areas. Virtual reality training enables the learners to understand and master the procedures leading to accreditation or compliance which would be relevant for healthcare, maintenance, selling to customers in different environments, to name a few examples. Learners can practise as many times as they wish until reaching perfection and also enable them to develop skills to perform procedures that cannot be performed until the actual situation emerges.

The difference between AR and VR is that VR provides the immersive experience that is personalised and is accomplished with the help of specially designed pair of VR glasses that help in navigating through the environment in which the action will take place in the real world. In the manufacturing world, auto manufacturers, like Ford, are training their assembly line employees to handle the tools and become familiar with the work environment before they enter the workplace. This helps the organisation to assess the capabilities acquired and their fitment for the jobs to be performed so as to minimise costly mistakes in production environment.

Engineering education will get a major boost with the introduction of virtual reality in training students to understand and visualise the designing and building process which are not possible to experience in traditional classroom teaching. At the same time it is possible to enhance engagement of the learners

with the learning process as it is akin to the video game experience that they are familiar with.

With exciting possibilities opening up for VR/AR applications in the learning context, training managers have to identify the specific learning areas which could benefit with their introduction. It would be good to start with a pilot by identifying one or two small applications and based on the response and experience of the learners, develop further plans for their integration with online and offline learning.

There are several gadgets that are now available to enhance the experience which include Oculus Rift, Microsoft Hololens, Google's cardboard VR kit, Samsung Gear and several others. These should be tested and tried in sync with the applications being developed and the type of experience required for imparting learning and or enhancing learner engagement.

Development of AR/VR applications should be planned such that the investment made once can be leveraged for an extended period of time and the costs can be minimised with the help of judicious mix of tools and involvement of subject matter experts. Industries which are required to train very large number of employees or those domains which are required to provide specialised training simulating the new life like situations could both benefit with these applications.

The time to reimagine learning and making it more impactful is here!

The writer is CEO, Global Talent Track, a corporate training solutions company