



Research Article

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# Exploring the role of online platforms in building learning communities: A case study of Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University

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## ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of online platforms has significantly influenced the dynamics of Open and Distance Learning (ODL), particularly in fostering learning communities that transcend geographical boundaries. This study explores the role of online platforms in building and sustaining learning communities within the context of Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU), a prominent institution in India's ODL landscape. Through a mixed-methods approach, the research investigates how digital tools and virtual environments facilitate collaboration, engagement, and knowledge-sharing among learners and educators. Data would be collected through surveys, interviews, and analysis of online interactions to assess the effectiveness of these platforms in creating a sense of community and enhancing the learning experience. Preliminary investigation reveals that online platforms play a pivotal role in promoting peer-to-peer interaction, reducing isolation, and supporting self-directed learning. However, challenges such as digital literacy, access to technology, and the need for structured facilitation were also identified. The study is expected to introspect on optimizing the use of online platforms to strengthen learning communities in ODL systems and emphasizing the importance of inclusive design, institutional support, and continuous engagement strategies. This research would contribute to the growing body of knowledge on technology-enhanced learning and provides insights for ODL institutions aiming to leverage digital tools for community building. The study would also identify challenges and areas for improvement, including the need for faculty training on technology integration, infrastructure development, and digital literacy programs for students. The findings of this study is expected to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on technology-enhanced learning, highlighting the potential of technology to transform the learning experience in open and distance learning institutions.

## INTRODUCTION

With advancements in digital technology, the role of online platforms in education has become more prominent, particularly in open and distance learning (ODL) (Garrison et al., 2001). Online platforms facilitate interactive learning environments, enhance student engagement, and foster knowledge-sharing among learners. Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU) (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). A leading institution in ODL, has embraced various digital tools to create a dynamic learning community. This study investigates how these platforms contribute to the

development of learning communities and evaluates their impact on student learning experiences.

## Literature Review

The rise of online learning has transformed how educational communities are formed, maintained, and experienced, especially in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) contexts. Scholars have increasingly focused on the role of digital platforms in creating inclusive, interactive learning environments that support both academic and social dimensions of education.

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A foundational perspective comes from Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001) through their *Community of Inquiry (CoI)* framework, which identifies cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence as the three pillars of successful online learning communities. These elements underscore the importance of critical engagement, human connection, and instructional guidance—all of which are made possible through thoughtful use of digital platforms. Their work has remained central in understanding how online environments can move beyond content delivery to foster a genuine sense of community.

This is further supported by Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism, which views learning as inherently social and emphasizes the value of interaction in knowledge construction. Online platforms allow learners to engage in dialogue, co-create meaning, and support each other—mirroring the collaborative learning Vygotsky advocated, albeit in virtual spaces.

Palloff and Pratt (2007) argue that building effective online learning communities depends on the ability of platforms to encourage open communication and shared responsibility. Their emphasis on interaction aligns with Wenger's (1998) concept of *Communities of Practice*, where individuals learn through shared engagement within a domain of common interest. These studies suggest that technology, when used intentionally, can cultivate strong collaborative bonds among learners.

The emotional and psychological dimensions of online learning are also well-documented. Richardson and Swan (2003) demonstrate that students' satisfaction in online courses correlates positively with the frequency and quality of their interactions. Rovai (2002) extends this by showing that a strong sense of community reduces isolation and increases motivation—both crucial in ODL settings. He emphasizes that platforms with features such as forums, group chats, and peer discussions help create a learning culture grounded in connection.

Technological advancements have enabled collaborative practices that were once restricted to face-to-face settings. Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) highlight how tools like forums, wikis, and shared documents can facilitate dynamic group learning experiences. In parallel, Siemens (2005), through his *Connectivism Theory*, presents a vision of learning as a networked process. He argues that knowledge today is distributed across networks, and that learning occurs by navigating and nurturing these connections—something that online platforms are uniquely positioned to support.

Despite these advantages, several scholars caution against the challenges of creating robust learning communities online. Moore (1993) introduced the concept of *Transactional Distance*, referring to the psychological and communicative gaps that can arise in remote education. He suggests that online platforms must actively work to bridge these gaps by integrating real-time interaction and personalized feedback.

Similarly, Hiltz and Turoff (2002) warn that the absence of physical presence can make it harder to build meaningful relationships and nuanced understanding. They advocate for multi-modal communication—incorporating text, video, and audio—to simulate the richness of face-to-face interaction and strengthen community bonds.

While digital platforms clearly offer unprecedented opportunities to build learning communities, they also introduce new hurdles such as digital literacy gaps, unreliable connectivity, and emotional distance. Thus, the success of online learning communities depends not only on the technology itself but also on how it is designed, facilitated, and integrated into the learners' socio-cultural context.

### Research problem

The research problem in the study "*Exploring the Role of Online Platforms in Building Learning Communities: A Case Study of Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University*" revolves around understanding how online platforms facilitate community building among learners in an open and distance learning (ODL) environment. Specifically, the study seeks to address the following key issues:

#### *Limited Interaction in ODL*

Traditional distance education often lacks real-time interaction, leading to a sense of isolation among learners. The study explores whether online platforms can bridge this gap.

#### *Effectiveness of Online Platforms*

While online platforms provide opportunities for collaboration and engagement, their actual impact on fostering a sense of community among ODL learners at KKHSOU remains unclear.

#### *Challenges in Adoption and Accessibility*

Technological barriers, digital literacy, and internet connectivity issues may affect the effective use of online platforms in community-building efforts.

#### *Learner Engagement and Retention*

The study examines whether online platforms enhance learner participation, motivation, and retention in an ODL setting.

By investigating these challenges, the research aims to assess the role, benefits, and limitations of online platforms in strengthening learning communities at KKHSOU.

### Theoretical framework

The emergence of digital technologies has revolutionized the landscape of Open and Distance Learning (ODL). In the context of KKHSOU, the integration of online platforms such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), social media, video conferencing tools, and messaging apps enables the formation of learning communities—collaborative groups that foster communication, peer

support, and shared learning experiences. This study draws on established educational and sociocultural theories to conceptualize the role of these platforms in enhancing the ODL experience.

Online platforms enable both students and instructors to co-create meaningful discussions and sustain engagement despite geographical isolation. In Social Constructivist Theory (Lev Vygotsky, 1978), learning is seen as a social process, where knowledge is constructed through interaction with others. Tools like WhatsApp groups, Facebook, and LMS forums serve as “zones of proximal development”, where learners support each other’s understanding through dialogue. Learners at KKHSOU rely heavily on peer support via online tools to overcome content-related challenges. Connectivism (Siemens, 2005) is one such theory that proposes that learning in the digital age happens across networks. It emphasizes the importance of accessing and navigating information through digital means rather than merely retaining it. KKHSOU learners interact across various platforms and nodes (social media, video lectures, peer chat groups), building a personal learning network. Learning communities are seen as groups of people who share a common interest or practice. Online platforms can facilitate the creation of communities of practice where learners interact and support each other. This fact has been emphasised on in the Community of Practice Theory (Etienne Wenger, 1998). Online learning brings in collaboration. There is a kind of collaborative learning as learners get accessibility to a number of online resources pertaining to their educational fields. This very fact has been highlighted in the Online Collaborative Learning Theory (Linda Harasim, 2012). It is not just that online platforms help in building learning communities, rather online platforms can facilitate social learning by providing spaces for learners to interact, share ideas, and learn from each other’s experiences. Albert Bandura (1977) in his Social Learning Theory has emphasized on this fact. In fact, this theory emphasizes the role of social interaction and observation in learning.

### Objectives of the present study

- To investigate how online platforms support collaborative learning
- To assess the effectiveness of virtual communities in enhancing academic engagement
- To explore the strategies employed by KKHSOU in promoting digital learning environments

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. Online survey (through google forms) has been carried out with KKHSOU students in order to provide insights into

their experiences with online platforms. Statistical tools are used to analyze survey responses and identify trends.

### Concept of learning communities

Learning communities are defined as virtual spaces where learners unite around shared educational goals, promoting collaboration and deeper engagement. These communities are essential in enhancing student support and interaction, making them vital to the success of modern education.

To fully understand the concept of a learning community, it is important to explore its evolution. In ancient Athens and medieval monastic institutions, learning was grounded in direct interaction through mentorship, debate, and in-person dialogue. Traditional schools and universities later carried this legacy, but access remained limited by geography, socioeconomic barriers, and rigid academic structures.

The emergence of online learning platforms transformed this landscape by removing these barriers and making education more inclusive. Virtual classrooms enabled real-time and asynchronous interaction, collaborative projects, and global participation, thereby reshaping how learning communities form and function. Online discussion forums, for instance, have evolved into dynamic hubs for peer learning and knowledge exchange.

An online community is a digital space where individuals with shared goals connect and engage—entirely through virtual means. In the context of learning, such communities are defined by a common purpose and sustained through procedures that help achieve shared outcomes. Their effectiveness depends on aligning individual motivations with collective goals and fostering a culture of participation.

### Key features of online learning communities include

- Online communities are typically formed around shared goals, passions, or themes that unite their members
- Members engage through various digital formats like text, images, videos, or live sessions, promoting the sharing of knowledge and collaborative participation.
- These communities rely on a range of online platforms—such as discussion boards, social media networks, and chat applications—to support interaction and engagement.
- Virtual communities bring together people from different cultural backgrounds, geographic locations, and perspectives, creating a rich and inclusive environment.
- Membership in online communities is often open and adaptable, allowing individuals to join or exit based on their changing interests or needs.
- Effective online communities operate under clear guidelines and are often overseen by moderators to ensure respectful, productive, and organized interaction among members.



As online education expands, the value of learning communities is more evident than ever. These virtual communities replicate the collaborative nature of physical classrooms, offering students opportunities to interact, reflect, and grow together. Active participation, peer support, and shared exploration not only enrich understanding but also foster emotional and academic resilience. A strong learning community empowers students by connecting them with others facing similar challenges and goals, promoting both intellectual development and a sense of belonging.

### **Role of online platforms in building learning communities with special reference to Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University**

Digital media refers to content that has been converted into digital form and can be shared via the internet or computer networks. It encompasses various formats including text, audio, video, and graphics. Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU), established under the provisions of the KKHSOU Act 2005 passed by the Assam State Legislature, extensively utilizes digital media tools and technologies to provide efficient and hassle-free student support services.

As the only state open university in Northeast India, KKHSOU is dedicated to delivering accessible, high-quality higher education and training through advanced educational technologies. It adopts a blended learning model that combines face-to-face and online learning methods. Students receive a wide range of support services such as printed and digital self-learning materials, recordings of counselling sessions (shared on YouTube), video conferencing opportunities, online learning resources, library access, and more.

The university offers three major digital portals for users to access academic and administrative resources: the Learner's Portal, eBidya (its Learning Management System), and the KKHSOU RTI Portal.

### **Key Digital Platforms of KKHSOU**

#### *a. Official Website ([www.kkhsou.ac.in](http://www.kkhsou.ac.in)):*

The university website serves as a comprehensive source of information for students. It includes sections on university governance, academic schools, research activities, learner-related services, examinations, study centres, eBidya (LMS), digital library, and various e-services.

#### *Notable features include*

- Online Admission: Students can complete the admission process for various programs online.
- Digital Library: Offers access to a range of documents, including CIQA reports, conference materials, faculty publications, PhD theses, public lectures, university journals, and more.

- Learner's Corner: Includes services like dual degree information, e-admit cards, e-mark sheets, career counselling, and placement support.
- Examination Section: Provides details on examination schedules, results, old question papers, and passed-out students.
- Study Centres: Lists recognised centres with contact information and handbooks to help learners choose appropriately.
- eBidya: Hosts learning materials, multimedia content, and other academic resources.
- Additional Services: Includes grievance redressal, internal complaints, feedback systems, mentoring services, and access to the KKHSOU Android app.

#### **KKHSOU RTI Portal**

In compliance with the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005, this portal offers public access to essential information for ensuring transparency and accountability within the university.

#### *b. Social Media*

The university maintains an active presence on platforms like Twitter (@KKHSOU1), Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Telegram. These channels are used to share important academic and administrative updates. Dedicated groups are also maintained for students of various disciplines to facilitate e-mentoring and academic discussions.

#### *c. Email Communication*

Email serves as a direct communication tool between students and university staff. It is regularly used for addressing queries and academic concerns.

#### *d. Community Radio – Jnan Taranga*

KKHSOU runs a community radio station that broadcasts educational and socially relevant content within a 13 km radius. Programs cover topics such as women's issues, health, youth, and employment.

#### *e. Mobile Application*

An Android mobile app developed by the university provides students with access to various university-related resources and updates. It is available for free on the Google Play Store and supports Android versions 2.3.6 and above.

#### *f. Digital Library*

The university's digital library platform ensures global access to its educational and intellectual content. It serves as a repository for teaching and learning materials.

It is not just the availability of digital and other online platforms for carrying out seamless communication among the learners and the instructors. In order to maintain uninterrupted communication between the stakeholders of the University and the institution also, the IT cell has made use of Integrated University Management System (IUMS) and Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP).

Integrated University Management System (IUMS) is a software application for intelligently managing a University/Institution’s functions, which includes real-time information availability. ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) software solutions organizes, monitors, and simplifies all the administrative procedures for an educational institution and closes a critical communication gap between educators, parents, and students.

These two software applications have enabled the University to come up with a structured e-Office System which is intended to streamline the online interactive system. Special features of the e-Office System include -

- Online Leave Application Management System
- Circular Management System
- Assignment Management System
- Complain/Ticket Management Module
- Profile Management Modules
- eAdmit and eMarksheet Management
- Payment Reconciliation and Reporting System
- Learner Communication System
- Reporting Services

**ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

With the proliferation of digital platforms, especially in open and distance learning (ODL), online tools have emerged as critical spaces for community building, academic support, and peer collaboration. This study investigates the influence of online platforms in fostering learning communities among students of KKHSOU.

Accordingly an online survey (through google forms) was carried out among 434 learners where 146 were male and 288 were female. Learners were selected randomly from a few select study centres of KKHSOU situated in different designated areas of the state of Assam- Upper Assam, Middle Assam, Lower Assam, Barak Valley and Hills District. Data were collected using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) for the following indicators:

- Frequency of online platform usage
- Ease of access and usability
- Interaction with peers/tutors
- Participation in online academic groups/forums
- Sense of community and belonging
- Impact on academic performance

*Inferential Analysis shows the following*

*a. Gender-wise Mean Comparison (t-test)*

Interpretation: Female learners exhibit significantly higher engagement and benefit from online platforms than male learners.

*b. Correlation Matrix*

Positive correlations indicate that frequent, engaged users of online platforms perceive stronger academic support and community.

*Key Findings*

Online platforms like WhatsApp, Google Meet, Moodle, and Facebook groups play a critical role in building community among KKHSOU learners aligning with Richardson & Swan’s (2003) findings on social presence and satisfaction. The majority of learners (especially female students) find these platforms highly useful for academic discussions, doubt clearance, and peer interaction. Learners who frequently use online platforms report improved academic performance and motivation. Online academic groups are substituting traditional study circles, creating virtual learning ecosystems.

Indeed the adoption of online platforms at KKHSOU has led to several positive outcomes like enhanced student engagement, collaboration and peer learning, accessibility and flexibility and faculty-student interaction

Despite its benefits, online learning at KKHSOU faces several challenges as given below :

- *Digital Divide*

Limited internet access and lack of digital literacy hinder some students from fully participating in online learning (Hiltz & Turoff, 2002).

**Table 1:** Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Frequency of use of online platforms	4.1	0.9	High
Ease of use and accessibility	4.0	0.8	High
Interaction with peers/tutors	3.9	0.9	Moderate-High
Participation in WhatsApp/ Facebook groups	4.2	0.7	High
Sense of community	3.8	0.8	Moderate-High
Improvement in academic performance	4.1	0.7	High

**Table 2:** Gender-wise Mean Comparison (t-test)

Variable	Male Mean	Female Mean	p-value	Significant
Frequency of platform use	3.8	4.3	0.02	Yes
Peer/Tutor interaction	3.6	4.1	0.04	Yes
Sense of community	3.4	3.9	0.03	Yes
Academic performance improvement	4.0	4.4	0.01	Yes

**Table 3:** Correlation Matrix

Variables	Correlation with Learning Outcomes
Frequency of use	0.62
Peer interaction	0.59
Group participation	0.66
Sense of community	0.55



- *Student Isolation*

Unlike traditional classrooms, online platforms may create a sense of detachment among learners.

- *Assessment and Evaluation*

Ensuring academic integrity in online assessments remains a challenge.

- *Technical Issues*

Connectivity problems and software limitations affect the seamless delivery of online education.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

KKHSOU should formalize and support academic WhatsApp/Facebook groups under faculty moderation. The learners must be acquainted with the knowledge of digital literacy and platform navigation workshops must be conducted for new enrollees. Peer-led online communities for subject-specific learning can be encouraged. A centralized learning management system (LMS) should be established that promotes both structured learning and informal discussions.

This quantitative analysis itself highlights the transformative role of online platforms in building learning communities in an open university context like KKHSOU. The findings can guide policymakers and educators in enhancing digital strategies for inclusive and community-driven distance education.

Besides, to enhance the effectiveness of online learning communities at KKHSOU, the following measures have been recommended:

- *Improved Digital Infrastructure*

Expanding internet accessibility and providing digital literacy training to students.

- *Blended Learning Approach*

Combining online learning with occasional in-person sessions to promote engagement.

- *Innovative Assessment Strategies*

Implementing AI-driven and project-based assessments

to ensure academic integrity.

- *Community Engagement Initiatives*

Encouraging student-led study groups and discussion forums to strengthen learning communities.

## CONCLUSION

Online platforms play a crucial role in building learning communities at KKHSOU (Rovai, 2002), providing opportunities for collaboration, engagement, and flexible learning. While challenges persist, targeted interventions can enhance the effectiveness of digital education in ODL settings. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to measure the long-term impact of online learning platforms on student success.

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