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# Interviews with **Badrul Khan**

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## **E-Learning in Iran: Interview with Vafa Ghaffarian and S. Hamid Hosseini**

*As a student in Bangladesh during the 1970s, I used to dream about having access to well-designed learning resources, available at that time to those in industrialized countries. In the '70s, it was unthinkable to have equal access to such resources. In the '90s, with the emergence of the World Wide Web, my dream of equal access to quality learning resources became a reality. Since the publication of my **Web-Based Instruction** book in 1997, I have been researching the adoption of the Internet and digital technologies in delivering education and training worldwide. In this issue, we introduce to the reader two leaders in e-learning in Iran.*

**—Badrul Khan**

**Badrul Khan:** *The world has changed a great deal when it comes to education and training, with emerging and advanced technologies. New technologies have tremendous impacts on the educational development of a country. How is it in Iran?*

**Vafa Ghaffarian:** You can witness a similar situation in Iran. E-learning started in Iran in 2001, when Tehran University launched nine of its courses online. Nowadays, almost all universities are presenting some courses on the Internet, besides technical fields; even religious-based universities educate their students by employing these technologies. We

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should add tens of small training centers (such as **sadegh-net**) to this list.

**S. Hamid Hosseini:** As in many other countries, Iran has been affected greatly by the spread of ICT. Although there isn't enough technical and cultural infrastructure in Iran, as there is in some developed countries, there is high enthusiasm to employ ICT, and there have been considerable efforts in this regard. Currently, preparation for e-learning is ongoing, and many universities as well as religious educational centers are offering courses, providing the chance for students all over the nation to be educated in desired fields. Levels of education are different, though, and in some cases big leaps are required to achieve optimum potential.

**BK:** *People who are used to traditional classroom-based educational systems may find it difficult to adapt to new ways of learning through technology-enriched learning environments. It requires a tremendous effort to change people's mindsets for a change which may not have shown any positive impact as yet. You have been pioneers in e-learning in your institutions. Please share your experiences with e-learning in this regard.*

**VG:** There are some people emphasizing face-to-face advantages. We have found that a blended approach (a mix of online and class-based courses) is a good solution as a transient phase. Highlighting the satisfied student's opinion online is an effective way to motivate others to enter online courses. You know, we are building a new learning paradigm, and it requires time and effort to reach fruition.

**HH:** The solution offered at the Hadith Sciences College (Hadith are oral tradition relating to the life and words of the Prophet Muhammad) to confront the issue is to team



**Dr. Vafa Ghaffarian** is co-founder of **Sadegh-net** ([www.sadegh-net.com](http://www.sadegh-net.com)) Institute, one of the leading institutions of e-learning in Iran. Dr. Ghaffarian is also chairman of Telecommunication of Iran (TCI), the largest company in its field, and consults with large organizations on strategy. He is an assistant professor and has taught university courses on Strategic Management and Thinking.



**S. Hamid Hosseini**, President, Hadith Sciences Virtual University in Iran, of the Iranian Hadith Sciences College, is one of the proactive professionals in the Iranian e-learning community. He graduated from the Qom Islamic School in religious science and does research on Hadith and Islamic thought and methodology. He has set up a number of Websites to promote religious scholarship.

an experienced professor with a high-profile e-learning assistant. The assistants are well aware of educational goals and are responsible to produce content and deliver the presentation of the course. Meanwhile, observing outcomes, success, and student willingness, professors have been accepting the electronic method and have attained more readiness to cooperate. There should be no hurried action. However, right decisions and actions in production and presentation of e-learning facilitate the process. Publicizing best practices and achievements is a useful strategy. We must not involve in e-learning those people who assume that the computer and software can replace *all* aspects of a university and educational services. This approach causes diminished educational support. Results are obvious; no such system can be successful in the growth of students, and mistakenly, the e-learning concept will be held responsible for failure.

**BK:** *Do you think e-learning can be used to offer courses in all subject areas? Can technical courses be delivered online? Please comment on the pedagogical approach you prefer for online learning. It appears that students must learn on their own and from readings and lectures and possibly participating in discussion. How can they apply such methods to hands-on fields, where there needs to be a lot of demonstration and applications?*

**VG:** E-learning is more efficient in transferring knowledge rather than skills. Although engineering and nursing science students may be educated by e-learning, we face many shortages when it comes to practice. As a solution, a blended approach may offer the benefits of both virtual classrooms (for knowledge development) and physical field work (for skill improvement). The rapid development of e-learning technology and methods, and decreases in their limitations, also should be taken into account,

**HH:** There are advantages and disadvantages to any educational approach, as is true in traditional ones. E-learning has unique advantages of its own. I believe the more we employ e-learning tools and experiences, the more we can find solutions to increase efficiency of the methods. Consequently, the number and variety of courses offered will increase as well as their quality of presentation. We have focused our investment on content production in the study of Hadith, and we produce courses of the highest quality. The process involves restructuring content, numerous evaluation steps, and scientific control, exploiting advanced multimedia and studio tools to deliver concepts.

**BK:** *Do you envision that someday you will offer e-learning courses from Iran to other countries in the world and vice versa?*

**VG:** It's our certain vision, which directs and motivates our people inside **Sadegh-net**. There is not a day or night which I don't think about this issue.

**HH:** Yes, right now a number of students studying Hadith with us come from other countries. Also, we have set up an e-school in Arabic to respond to the great enthusiasm to learn Islamic science, targeting Arabic-speaking countries.

**BK:** *E-learning is gaining a great deal of attention in Iran. I was recently invited to deliver a keynote address via video conferencing at the International E-Learning Conference in Iran. This shows an increased interest in e-learning in Iran, with international participation for the conference. Do you see collaboration of e-learning projects among Iranian e-learning professionals and international experts to explore, discuss, and learn about the best ideas for e-learning?*

**VG:** Certainly I do. Prior to scientific projects, though, I believe that it should be started as a business partnership. Otherwise, it may not last, as you would expect.

**HH:** International communication is ever-increasing, thanks to the environment of ICT and the blur of geographic borders, and there is still more potential for that. We have established connections with experts in other countries and benefit from their consultancy services.

**BK:** *In researching the question of "What does it take to provide meaningful e-learning environments for diverse learners?" I found that there are many of issues critical to the development of meaningful e-learning. My research has shown that these issues encompass eight categories, including pedagogical, institutional, technological, interface design, evaluation, management, resource support, and ethical considerations (<http://BadrulKhan.com/framework>). I would like to hear your thoughts on any one of the eight categories of issues for the successful design of e-learning in Iran.*

**VG:** These are some key factors that should be considered cautiously when it comes to e-learning. The pedagogical issues are the most important ones; I believe these can multiply both the effectiveness of learning and satisfaction of learners. If we want to look at this issue from the angle of technology, I think that having knowledgeable people on the ground in the target market is more important than the technology itself. If I want to add one dimension to your octagonal model, I think the Cultural dimension would play a key role too. It can act as a powerful barrier or supporter.

**HH:** In all areas mentioned, there are fine initiatives in Iran, but technical issues attract the most attention, even though all items are of equal importance. We do our best to clarify the importance of all items for Iranian decision-makers and students, starting and developing from our own school. Holding scientific conferences with e-learning has had a considerable effect on a more scientific look at the topic. In all universities, we have an e-learning department; but there is a spot open in the ministry of higher education. There needs to be more scientific investment in the field.

**BK:** *As e-learning is becoming more acceptable in both academic and corporate settings in Iran, It is expected that more and more Iranian institutions will invest in e-learning for education and training development. To develop new learning environments with new technologies, many of these institutions would require professionals with e-learning instructional design skills to assist in e-learning production. Do you see an increasing demand for e-learning*

professionals in Iran? If such a demand exists, who is responsible for preparing such professionals? Do you see any opportunity for US universities and the US e-learning industry in the e-learning development in Iran?

**VG:** I see e-learning as a new formation of existing sub-systems to make a new system. It means that the key building blocks of e-learning are available, but it needs a new architecture to be made (institutional issues in your model). So the most important necessity for fast development of e-learning in Iran is people who make the big picture (the managers in your model). The partnership with foreign universities and learning industry would be meaningful if they focus on the total system rather than sub-systems. Being meaningful they must fill gaps, not delete the existing local potentials.

**HH:** E-learning development in Iran is definitely dependent on providing expert human resources and instructors, and enough attention has not been paid to it. There have been initiatives in Iranian universities, yet there is a long way ahead. One of the best ways to fill the gap is to attain help based on the experiences of universities all over the world. □

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## Author Guidelines for Magazine Articles

In preparing an article for Educational Technology Magazine the primary fact to keep in mind is that this magazine is not a formal research journal. It is, as the name implies, a magazine. The Editors are looking generally for articles which interpret research and/or practical applications of scientific knowledge in education and training environments.

Thus, your article should not be cast in the form of a traditional research report. The facts of your research, or that of others, should be stated succinctly. Then you should go on to explain the implications of this research, how it can be applied in actual practice, and what suggestions can be made to school administrators, trainers, designers, and others.

The style of writing should be on the informal side—an essay—since once again this is a magazine and not a formal academic journal. Authors are free to state their opinions, as long as the opinions are clearly identified as such. The use of specialized jargon should be kept to a minimum, since this magazine has a very wide interdisciplinary audience.

There are no minimum and maximum length restrictions. Make your article as short as possible to do the job you intend. As a general rule, most articles are about 3,000 words. Include graphics as appropriate.

Note too that this magazine is read in more than 100 countries, by persons holding prominent and influential positions. They expect a very high level of discourse, and it is our goal to provide major articles of excellence and lasting significance.

# Point of View

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## The Curious Case of the Polio Virus Learn Node

Judy Breck

*Why would my Learn node: Polio virus invades from cell into the gut*<sup>i</sup> get 2,077 on-site views in the first eleven months of 2008, while the next most popular learn node in my collection, about Winston Churchill, got only 734 on-site views? The number of on-site views for my learn nodes drops rapidly after Churchill: lady bugs as green troops, 424, Zac the Rat teaches the letter “A,” 338, helmets that prevent brain damage, 327, meerkat facts, 291.

And would you not think that the general online public would be more interested in lady bugs and meerkats, surely—and Churchill, helmets, and phonics, probably—than a polio invasion of the gut?

The popularity of my polio virus learn node is even more curious when you realize that it is bundled inside of course materials and made up of slides, numbers 26 and 28, deep inside a PDF that is inside of course materials. The exact location of the curiously popular polio virus learn node is Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Open Courseware for course 550.630 *Public Health Biology*.<sup>ii</sup> To reach it online, you need to go to that courseware and download *Module 2: Pathogens and Host Immunity*, open *Lecture 3: Pathogens: Nature and Transmission*<sup>iii</sup>—where the slides are inside.

### The Learn Node Method

My learn node project was put online in the fall of 2007. It operates from a WordPress blog titled Learnodes.com<sup>iv</sup> where I launch blog posts called *learn nodes* with the specific goal of driving Internet traffic to open educational resources (OER). The learn nodes posts are designed to be landing pages that will acquire Internet visitors who are searching online for the topic of the learn node. The goal is for these visitors to land on the learn node and then click through it to quality OER learning pages I have selected and linked out from the post.

We will return to the question of why my polio virus learn node received so many visitors compared to the dozens of other learn nodes I launched over the past year. First, a look at how well the learn node method works. Once visitors were attracted to the polio virus learn node, did they click

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**Judy Breck**, a Contributing Editor, writes about online learning on her blog, **GoldenSwamp.com** (e-mail: judy\_breck@gmail.com).