

Open and Distance Education in India: A Half-journey within**Dr. Bhaskar Chaudhary**

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Abstract

Education is one of the most powerful weapons to fight against various discriminations prevalent in today's world. For providing wider opportunities to most of the population, Open and Distance Education (ODE) has come up as a means. Distance education earlier named as correspondence education initially started in the Western countries in the middle of the 19th century. India witnessed its presence almost after a century in the form of postal/correspondence education which was primarily linked to the educational activities of commercial institutions. According to Chib (1977), in *India*, Bombay (now Mumbai) was the centre of International Correspondence Schools (ICS) and the British Institutes (BIET) for providing postal courses. These courses were in areas of engineering, management, architecture, interior decoration, etc. The creation or adoption of new technologies and their applications is evolutionary. Nevertheless, in the changed scenario there is every possibility that today's learners would look for more sources of information, thus tapping the potential of new technologies, as per their requirements. This article discusses the basic concepts, features and means of modern open & distance education in the educational process. However, the emphasis is laid on the diversified role of conventional as well as ODE situations.

Key words: *Education, open and distance, virtual.*

Introduction

ODE is based on the concept of self-directed learning. In the modern e-world, the learner is provided a variety of learning experiences with an input of information and communication technology (ICT), in the form of self-instructional course materials delivered through various media formats such as audio, video and so on. Unlike the conventional system of imparting education, the distance education system stress on the need for training different functionaries of education. There were strong beliefs that ODE could not extend educational opportunities at a

lower cost than conventional education. It was also apprehended that the expansion of ODE would affect the maintenance of the standards of education in a negative way. But over the time the things have changed.

Why Open and Distance Education?

The socio-academic dynamics make distance education relevant both in the developed and developing economies. Similarly, '*information explosion*' warrants continuous training of people to keep a pace with the changing environs. Likewise, '*population explosion*' (particularly in the developing nations) increasingly demands for higher literacy rate which in present scenario is an example of clear mismatch between demand and supply.

The correspondence education was intended to provide further opportunities to those who had either missed formal education or could not afford it or even could not have required grades to get admitted to it. Social access and equity were the other objectives of setting up the ODE system. Today open universities in India have taken bold steps to launch several technical and professional programmes/courses. These include: computer programme, management programme and so on.

International Context

A few researchers trace the beginning of distance education in 1833 when a tutor taught English composition to students by post, thus providing two-way communication. However, the general belief is that correspondence education took formal shape in England in 1840 through Issac Pitman who started using postal tuition to teach shorthand to his many students spread all over England. The open university of United Kingdom came into existence in the year 1969 as an independent and autonomous institution through a Royal charter. Similarly, to make higher education available to all categories of people in the Netherlands, the Netherland Open University came into existence in 1983 and became functional in September 1984. Besides it, other European countries, viz. France, Italy and Spain also advanced in the field of distance education. France designed distance education originally for training of the teachers. The *Centre de tele-Enseignmen't a Distance* (CNED) is an important distance education institution in France.

Similar efforts were made in African countries and in northern America for the establishment of ODE centres. A number of countries in Africa like Tanzania, Botswana, Swaziland and Ghana organised ODE courses for the training of teachers. Likewise, United States of America (USA)

used it for Armed forces followed by establishment of several well-known correspondence institutions in Pennsylvania State University, Indiana University, University of California etc. Russia established its first open university in 1990.

Indian Context

At the time of Independence, India did not have a comprehensive 'National Policy of Education'. The policy of Britishers had definitely narrow objectives. Independence brought with it the hopes for reforms in education. People in general felt that transformation of education, which the Indian leaders pleaded for during the 'freedom struggle', should be initiated as early as possible. The need for the change was sufficiently expressed in the following words (Naik, 1975), *“The first and the most important step would be to abandon our exclusive reliance on the traditional system of formal education and to move in the direction of providing life-long education for all for creating a learning society.”*

The Education Commission (1964) under the Chairmanship of Dr. D.S. Kothari highlighted the backdrop in the national pattern of education. It pointed out its exclusive reliance on full-time instruction along with non-development of the part-time education. The commission recommended evening colleges for part-time and correspondence education for own-time education. The Commission differed with the idea that correspondence course is an inferior form of education than what is given in regular schools and colleges. Hence, it further recommended widespread organisation of correspondence courses supported by well-coordinated radio and television programmes.

Keeping these points in view, the resolution for initiation of correspondence courses was accepted by then Planning Commission of India and the Central Advisory Board of Education. Consequently, the Ministry of Education constituted an expert committee under the chairmanship of Dr. Kothari, the then chairman of UGC. The committee recommended the introduction of correspondence courses at the first instance in University of Delhi, leading to a degree or equivalent qualifications.

Emergence of Distance Education in India

Distance education, in the form of correspondence education, was also recommended as a reformative measure by the delegation (representatives from Union Ministry of Education, M.S. University (Baroda) and NCERT) sent by the Government of India during 1967-71 to the erstwhile USSR. The delegation after studying correspondence education in the erstwhile

USSR strongly favoured it for India & stated “it is our considered opinion that the system of correspondence courses for teacher training can be profitably adopted in our own country...” (Singh, 1978). However, the initiation of correspondence courses and the subsequent developments in this stream of education was hardly attended, as a policy.

The debate at the national level on the open university system stimulated thinking in various states. In Andhra Pradesh, a proposal was made to start an open university as early as in 1978. Ram Reddy, the then Vice Chancellor of the Osmania University visited the British Open University and recommended a similar institution for Andhra Pradesh to strengthen non-formal education in the state. However, the proposal did not bear fruit. About the same time, Osmania University made a proposal for starting an 'Open Education College' (OEC) to strengthen distance education. The college was to have full autonomy but the degrees were to be awarded by the Osmania University. Initially, the Government of Andhra Pradesh, decided to establish an open university with the objective of providing access to higher education to the adult population of the state along with upgrading their functional capacities and equalisation of educational opportunities. Thus, the Andhra Pradesh Open University (APOU) came into existence on August 26, 1982. It was later renamed as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU) in 1992. The setting up of APOU provided momentum to the course of distance education in the country. Further, the establishment of IGNOU (1985) became a major landmark in ODE in India.

Conventional Educations ODE

Since ancient times, the conventional approach of teaching & learning glorifies the teacher as important. This mode, though considered effective by earlier educationist, has seen certain drawbacks in the contemporary educational process. Advancements in science & technology along with expansion of knowledge have made it almost impossible to impart the knowledge in the four walls of the classroom. Moreover, ODE is also overcoming the political and geographical barriers to the movement of knowledge.

ODE: Widening Horizons

Considering the satisfactory progress of the initial correspondence education, the UGC appointed a committee to consider the expansion of correspondence courses in universities. The committee suggested that correspondence courses should be started only in a selected number of well-established universities with strong faculty strength and provided meaningful

guidelines for its expansion. Besides the other things, the committee suggested study centres for contact classes with students, use of the laboratory and library facilities along with preparation of quality instructional materials. Today, the electronic media along with computer and satellite technology is providing new opportunities to ODE. For making ODE system an alternative channel, the essential components i.e. flexibility, well-written materials, training of staff, contact programmes, provision of study centres etc. are to be managed effectively.

ODE Expansion and the Challenges

In spite of its long journey, correspondence education in India (now distance education), continue to be of average quality. Before the emergence of the open university system in the country, correspondence education was criticised by educationists and conventional university teachers for its ineffectiveness and inefficiency. Some of the limitations which contributed to its ineffectiveness in India are:

- inadequate enrolment in open universities.
- quality of study material.
- improper organisation of personal contact programmes.
- non-competent and inadequate staff.
- delay in the despatch of course material.
- lack of laboratory and library facilities.
- untimely submission and evaluation of assignments.

The self-directed learners are fully capable of taking charge of their own learning. It is, therefore, usually argued that self-learning requires learners to be highly committed, self-initiative and self-disciplined. Teachers must realize that student-centred learning requires a tremendous amount of effort in writing and developing suitable units, together with tutorial and counselling duties, marking tests and assignments and providing feedback to students.

Means of Imparting ODE

A wide range of teaching media are employed in distance education; their effectiveness consists of organic relationship between the planning of course content and the teaching methods. Broadly speaking, the instructional material falls into the following groupings:

Printed Materials

Guided study assignments, especially written textbooks, directed reading, resources of libraries, self-assessment problems etc. are included in the printed materials. Of all learning

media, printed material is important and significant. The stimulus to learning which it offers depends primarily on the sense of progressive mastery of the subject which the student derives from it. The printed material dispatched to the students at regular intervals is an essential component of ODE system.

All the open universities use self-learning material (SLM) and a few have radio and audio-video programmes along with counselling facilities for the learners at the study centres. Almost all the open universities use assignments and a few have strong student support services. The conventional textbooks, handout notes and other printed materials can often be used in self-instructional situations. Most of these are designed simply to present information, not to provide a structured learning experience for the users. The effectiveness of such materials can be increased by supplementing them with a suitable study guide designed in a systematic and cumulative way. The print material is easy to use and can be applied without additional resources such as electricity, smart classrooms etc. They are applied at any time and any place especially, when there is limited access to advanced technology such as the use of a computer and internet. It can be easily edited, reviewed and referenced. It also saves money and time. In the case of certain core subject areas, the text books represent one of the cheapest and most convenient sources of self-instructional resource materials. Directed study of such text books can be a highly effective way of teaching basic facts, principles, applications, etc. i.e., of achieving objectives mainly of the lower cognitive type. To achieve higher cognitive and some non-cognitive objectives, it requires considerably greater skill on the part of the designer of the study material.

However, it has a few limitations also. It cannot show motion. Print is used mostly for passive learners. But sometimes or many a times, reading printed materials can motivate more than watching a television program or taking part in an audio conference. Print materials do not provide proper feedback and also demand the performance of interactive exercises.

Non-printed Material

Advancements in technology have contributed to the overall development of people across the world. Many of the functions performed by the human beings are replaced by electronic gadget(s). The non-print includes audio-visual aids (slides, film-strips, tape recorders etc.). Radio or television broadcasts at national or local stations are also included under this category. Use of satellites and direct to home is another convenient mode for people learning at a distance.

IGNOU and other state open universities are using ICT in diverse ways. Use of media and technology has now created virtual campuses. The national initiatives of teleconferencing, Gyan Darshan and Gyan Vani cover the educational programmes in regional language also.

However, suitable ready-made course is seldom available therefore; instructors have to produce their own. This is time-consuming, often expensive and (in many cases) requires special skills that an average teacher simply does not possess. In some cases, it may be possible to acquire the required skills by undergoing suitable human resource development training (e.g., learning basic video production skills). Although self-instruction can be used to achieve some of the objectives but the technique is inappropriate for some higher cognitive and non-cognitive objectives.

How effective these means are?

Paper-based self-study materials of the open-learning type have essentially the same strengths as directed study of material in textbooks etc. It can be even more effective if the materials are well prepared. Well-designed open-learning packages allow students to learn in an interactive way, learning by doing and drawing feedback from the responses built into the materials. Learners use the materials at their own pace along with times and places of their own choosing (when provided with personal copies of the packages). Learners can work again and again through difficult parts of an open-learning package, until they have mastered its contents. The best open-learning packages are written in 'user-friendly' language, to ensure that learners find them stimulating and interesting.

However, the task of producing effective learning materials is inevitably extremely time-consuming and also requires a great deal of skill on the part of the writer. This is doubly true in the area of electronics, computer science etc. that are in a more-or-less continuous state of change. Modern open-learning packages are usually carefully planned in terms of their layout and design to make them as attractive, user-friendly and constructive as possible. The content should be adjusted so as to be directly relevant with the intended learning outcomes.

Conclusion

To initiate the left-half journey, ODE programmes must have a significant media mix to meet learning styles of diversified learners. The basic purpose of the open university is to provide instruction to the learners at the doorsteps through various media and technology (UNESCO, 2002). A valuable idea, in a multimedia supported individualized-learning system(s) under

ODE is to increase the impact and effectiveness by carefully choosing the objective(s) of the topic. The modular and credit-based programmes are more flexible, goal oriented, learner-friendly and both market as well as development oriented. However, a wider and sustained effort is required for further dissemination of knowledge.

ODE, no doubt, has been benefited by technology in various ways and at various levels. From both the sociological and the economic points of view, technology has made an impact on education. A number of institutions in the developed countries are offering courses through various communication technologies such as interactive TV, computer conferencing and internet. Some openlearning institutions in the developing countries are now offering online courses. As a result, learners opt to pursue their study through educational technology: both the popular and modern media.

Technology is of paramount importance to the future of education. It can provide new and innovative means to bring educational opportunities and social justice to greater number of people of all ages, especially those who have historically been excluded, such as populations in rural areas, women facing social barriers and special students. To determine the economic success, knowledge plays a crucial input role in today's era. Effective use of technology viz. Open Educational Resources (OER) along with Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) in ODE can contribute to the timely transmission of information and knowledge, thereby helping education system meet this challenge. Large numbers of school teachers will be needed to meet the Education for All (EFA) and other development goals. The use of technology in ODE can also help in meeting teacher training targets. Moreover, it provides opportunities to complement on the job training and continuing education for teachers.

The last decade has witnessed a huge expansion of ODE in India and worldwide. In our country, the ODE system is playing a significant and supplementary role in providing education and training. With its wide recognition and acceptability, it has become a choice of even those who have been or are in the mainstream education (for additional qualifications). Further, the scope of technological advancements has accelerated the development of ODE. A mix of open, online and distance education (OODE) can become a strong *trio* in the upcoming time. Education, as a growing sector is moving ahead with a great speed and for the learners, it is utmost required to provide a fusion of OODE, so as to strengthen its relevance and improve quality with quantity.

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