

Theorizing the Untheorized: The 'Indian' Context of ODL Pedagogies

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Abstract

This paper is a deliberation on some crucial aspects of teaching-learning transactions in open and distance learning (ODL). This system, with its relative newness, has given cause for much debate within India regarding questions of 'openness', modes of pedagogy and teaching, the principles nurturing these modes and thus the ultimate question of 'quality' in education. The continuance of this debate also reflects the difficulty of any adequate theorization, which anchors knowledge-dissemination processes in institutions of higher education on the whole. The absence of an adequate contextual theorization keeps out of sight a sense of complacency in continuing with inherited assumptions regarding academic transactions in the ODL mode. Since ODL is still an evolving field in India, it is clear that unless some clarity is achieved with regard to the assumptions that guide academics in open and distance learning, the problematics of quality and equity must haunt this mode.

Keywords: openness, pedagogy, quality, equity, exit-criteria

1. Introduction

Of late in India, open and distance education has received unprecedented attention from the concerned authorities. However, in the changing arena of Indian higher education, the descriptions of open and distance education have to be expanded to include much more than academic arrangements that enable people to learn at the time, place, and pace which satisfy their circumstances and requirements. The conventional ideas of distance education refers to a kind of learning made possible over a spatial distance between the teacher and the learner, and open education refers to a system of learning made available at a place and time of the learner's own choice. We may further define open education as a system that does not operate through traditional conventions, which are essentially restrictive in nature. (Note 1) The larger the number of such restrictions left unobserved and unaddressed, the higher the need of the 'openness' of the type of education under consideration. Thus, we should be able to make our point clear that 'correspondence'/distance education institutes may or may not be 'open' in the sense we have mentioned above, or may be open only to a limited degree, and that even a traditional college/university may become 'open' to a recognizable extent. Hence, it is time we reconsidered and redefined the idea of ODL itself which holds tremendous significance in the context of Indian higher education in present times.

Michael G. Moore's theory of 'transactional distance' comes as an answer to many of the questions raised against ODL-related pedagogies. This theory of 'transactional distance' that appeared during 1970s stated that distance education is not simply a geographic and spatial separation of learners and teachers, but, more importantly, is a pedagogical concept. It described the universe of teacher-learner relationships that exist when learners and instructors/teachers are separated by space and/or by time. This theory further stated that if learning outcomes in any distance education course are to be maximized, 'transactional distance' needs to be minimized or shortened. There are three key interactive components that have to work together to shorten the transactional distance and provide for a meaningful learning experience: dialogue [interaction between learners and teachers], structure [of the instructional programs], and the degree of self-directedness of the learner [learner autonomy]. This has

set the norms for the debate on open and distance learning but the parameters for the same are to be read differently in India. Therefore, in today's educational and cultural contexts, the meaning of 'openness' itself must be redefined as it has to address issues contextually valid and pedagogically relevant. Contextually valid in the sense that we cannot apply the idea of on-campus learning through ODL, and resources have to be used optimally thus the compulsion to use digital technologies and ICTs beyond the campus. In addition, pedagogically relevant in the sense that teaching-learning in ODL must cater to the needs of specific target audience. In this paper, an attempt has been made to establish some points that can constitute certain integral aspects of teaching-learning in the open and distance mode of education in India. These are:

- Learning in ODL must refer to cultural factors over and above psychological theories of learning. ODL pedagogy needs to be considered as being distinct from older methods relevant to classroom teaching.
- The design of study materials both in SLM and MMM format has to address the multifarious aspects of the learning environment. 'Openness' and 'quality' are attributes firmly tied to ideas of enriched learning environments and learning outcomes. Consequently, 'exit criteria' holds centre stage in the ODL system.
- The design of study materials must contain implicit references to institutional infrastructure. Learning materials constitute only one aspect of what is made available to the learner. For the totality of what goes into the learning environment for the distance learner, other institutional infrastructure like information channels are to be considered important aspects of the learning processes.
- Study material design must be based on the levels and degrees of interaction between teacher and learner that an institution envisages within a programme of study. The ODL system has to revise the idea of teacher-learner contact through various means.
- Unless ODL comes to embrace in full the connotations of 'openness', the system will be cost-effective only in the short-term. An unsustainable mopping-up campaign by older universities will only play second fiddle to older face-to-face systems of learning.

2. The Why and How of the Debate

Partly, perhaps, due to the fact that open and distance education evolved from a set of sociological compulsions in the developed West, this should undercut the less developed countries' persuasion to opt for the system as a solution to the urgent need for a rapid-rate 'Human Resource Development' unless it is made to answer the developmental requisites in altered situations. In one sense, the need for an adequate theoretical basis to the practices of teaching-learning in the ODL mode can be viewed against recent statements by the corporate sector in connection with college-level graduation courses and the alleged failure of the formal system to deliver the desired levels of trained manpower suitable for industrial employment. The conscious decision of Indian policy-makers to adopt this alternate system (especially in higher education) reveals the need for urging ODL educators towards a very special set of Indian goals. Another corollary of the debate on the very goals of education can, if required, be joined here on the goals of learning, thus raising to scrutiny the primary goals of ODL. Indian conditions demand of the ODL system to deliver results in terms of pushing up the Gross Enrolment Ratio as a primary objective in higher education. Highly lucrative 'teaching shops' in the garb of directorates of distance education operating without checks in the free-market economy have, through an inverted perspective, brought to view the urgent need to conceptualize the outlines of what can deliver 'equity, openness and quality'. Indian universities have displayed their keenness to turn such critical compulsions to advantage by turning the ODL mode of education into a mopping-up operation leaving out in the rush what should substantiate their financial clout in the name of those complexities that underpin ODL methods of higher education. Thus, it is arguable that open and distance learning, when linked to college-level and higher education, is both richly potent and amenable to designs that can impart to students at the higher stages of their formal education those learning experiences which stretch well beyond the capacities of the classroom-centred form of learning.

2.1 Changes in Benchmarking

Whereas a traditional academic mindset has tended to focus on the problems of the elimination of the classroom teacher from the teaching-learning process, a significant part of the debate has to address the questions of how 'open' and how adequately responsive to the 'distant learner' this system is. The Indian situation has rendered these questions as being of the greatest urgency. 'Quality', as an identifiable goal, currently stands only in relation to some benchmarks that evolved on the shoulders of the formal system over time. Such traditionally held ideas rest on references to 'adequate infrastructure', 'well-qualified, experienced and trained faculty', 'commonly recognized standards of entry and duration of studies for courses', 'curricular content and evaluation schemes' and the 'conventions of formal face-to-face education' structured around the number of lectures, tutorials, and practicals, among other such regulatory norms. These benchmarks have been brought over from the older formal system in revised editions, over time, to gird course preparation and the quality of study materials, to structure the teaching-learning in the form of transactions involving feedback and learner-support services such as counselling, tutorials, and other forms of interactivity. The ODL system, by shifting the focus onto the 'exit criteria' of the learner, and matched by the compulsion to provide enriched learning environments to such learners, and the importance it attaches to learning outcomes, has to augment the familiar benchmarks with many of its own as these develop through practice. But one could claim, overall, that there has been a shift in the perception of benchmarking through reviewing ideas of socialization, contact and 'visible involvement' in teaching-learning processes, overemphasis on interaction, attention to 'exit behaviour' over 'flexible entrance qualifications' as well as closer attention being paid to the designing of curriculum and course, student evaluation and feedback arrangements, among others. Badri N. Kaul in his "Towards a Culture of Quality in Open Distance Learning: Present Possibilities" has discussed this issue in great detail.

2.2 Open and Distance Education in India

It is known that the system of 'open university' in India was the result of a suggestion by the Planning Commission Committee in 1969. Suranjan Das in his paper "The Higher Education in India and the Challenges of Globalisation" writes about how the rapid growth of the open university system since the establishment of the Indira Gandhi National Open University in Delhi in 1985 has drastically changed the educational scenario of India. Subsequently in 1986, the Indian state adopted a National Policy on Education, which stressed Education as a unique investment in the present and the future. The term 'open', which was initially used to convey a liberal attitude in terms of the admissibility of lower levels of academic performance, (hence a flexibility with a view to extending the outreach of academic courses to the less privileged sections of society), was later used to mean, as used by K. B. Power, "suggestions of the lessening or removal of restrictions of exclusions and of privilege, of demolishing or lowering established barriers between subject areas, of enlarging and enriching the areas of activity and experience graded as educational", and to symbolize a "shift in the relationship between teacher and pupil towards that of student and adviser." Hence, in India an open university or a dual mode provider should stand for access and equity, which would encourage interdisciplinarity, versatility, informality and student-centeredness. In other words, this summary history indicates an unvoiced national need to mitigate the rigidities hardening the core of an educational system, which in reality had been handed down from colonial times. While the earliest transformations took the shape of a secondary degree-awarding, parallel system of 'correspondence' courses was only a poor duplication of what had already been in place for the more privileged sections of society. The Kothari Committee of 1961 recommended for education through correspondence courses in India. Subsequently, the University of Delhi established the first school of correspondence courses and continuing education in India in 1962. The Punjabi University in Patiala, Punjab was the second Indian University to set up a full-fledged directorate of correspondence course in 1968. And it is not surprising to note that by the end of 2010 India has seen 14 open universities and around 140 dual mode institutions.

The recent debates and discussions on higher education in India arose as the necessary correlates of the shifts in the model of development adopted by different governments over one and a half decades. This debate can also be contextualized in the UN's Millennium Development Goals Report (Note 2) due to which education began to gain renewed importance around the world. With the prevalent restructuring of older regulatory bodies, questions and newer obligations have appeared on the platter in front of the formal system. A source of conflict and attrition consistently besetting the ODL institutions in India has been the need for teachers adequately trained to teach students enrolling in this system and its institutional reliance on those who work with traditional classroom methods. This point has been

successfully dealt by Andrea Hope who argues that although DE Universities and dual mode providers continue to survive and fulfill their mission to outreach and expand the benefits of education, the differences between distance, dual mode and face-to-face education have been eroded by the pervasive presence of internet-based technologies in all three modes. This also necessitates the redefining of the role of the teachers in a changing context of a globally competitive world. However, the names of the dual mode providers she has mentioned are mostly Western and Delhi University is the only Indian university that became a part of her reference. Subsequently, many of the arguments she has provided are not applicable in the context of India as the Indian universities, compared to many of the South East Asian universities, are yet to meet with the demand of the web-based changes against the traditional on-campus teaching paradigm and on-line web-based delivery of information.

In the face of a new focus on accountability confronting ODL institutions which initially had to sustain themselves financially, inherited attitudes towards teaching and learning taken from the 'closed' formal system have shown up to be poor responses to a set of requirements generated by the ODL system, which is run on different principles. Increasingly, practice has shown the truth of this statement. So, our experience is that that practices of face-to-face teaching need to be revised and reinstated based on a new understanding of student-teacher relations. While the parity of programmes or courses is an issue to be decided at the level of institutional policy-making, for the learner, such a guarantee is grounded in the realm of daily practices. Dual-mode universities of India, in particular, are faced with the double burden of having to justify through the proper orientation of faculty the kind of status they wish to concede to their respective directorates of distance education. These factors point to the scope for some necessary visible changes in the system of higher education. In countering the widespread perception of ODL systems as being of doubtful repute, traditional universities offering programmes in the traditional classroom mode as well as through their directorates of distance education have to set down regulations with regard to the new developments in teaching-learning processes.

2.3 Teaching Learning in the ODL System

In the simplest terms, as a student-centred system of learning in which the student stands at the centre of the learning process, ODL has to a considerable extent replaced the traditional 'banking' concept (Note 3) of the all-knowing teacher with what the student actually needs to know. The Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire has done some extensive studies on this issue. In practice, the teacher is required to carry on a dialogue with the learner. Whereas some of the earliest analogies to describe this method were taken from the corporate categories of economic realities, and education tended to be clubbed together with the 'service sector' where the teacher is seen as the service-provider to clients (students) who only 'pay' for education. Teachers working in the ODL system have increasingly come to understand that the analogy wrongly projects a transaction that is creative and is not reducible to the demand-supply chain. Superannuated teachers have bewailed the dismantling (through ODL) of this relationship thanks mostly due to a distorted perception of a relationship that has, in some cases, turned into an oppressive network. A Western example in this context seems interesting. While analyzing the role of adult students two researchers Johnson Bailey and Ronald Cervero have found that in traditional academic settings, it is assumed that the professor has the ability to exert powerful control and to shape the environment more than anyone else. However, the art of facilitation, which is the basis of pedagogical practices, mitigates such issues. The participants in the classes and the teachers who taught felt that there were many definite instances where power was seized, negotiated, and forfeited in the classroom.

The fact is that effective teaching can never be replaced by the large-scale induction of ICT aids into teaching. The ODL mode works on the principle of need-based student-teacher interaction, which directly departs from traditional classroom principles, which have frequently been unwilling to grant strength of understanding or cultural knowledge to the learners. The ODL teacher, who takes care to grant the value of 'prior knowledge' to the learner, cannot assume the role of the all-wise guru. Thus, the role of SLM as the 'teacher in print' helps to create a learning environment in which the function of the ODL educator is to be contextualized so that the knowledge-base of the educators can be updated to suit the emerging needs of the distance learners. For example, the basic content of a humanities discipline like English Literature is easily transcribed into print as the 'teacher-in-print' by which name the self-learning material (SLM) is categorized. It is probably no mere coincidence that this was the very discipline that first went into the 'correspondence' mode since much of its classroom content has

tended to remain constant. If a curriculum is allowed to continue without change for unconscionable lengths of time, atrophy sets in innumerable ways. In many parts of India, this has been the bane of higher education, especially at the tertiary level in the colleges. Leaving aside those questions and arguments as to why this has been allowed to happen, the all-important question that hangs in the balance is that of the renewal of the knowledge-base in the curriculum, thus in the teachers. Turning this over onto the problem of adequate pedagogies that facilitate such renewals, the ODL method does not seem to preclude this in any considerable measure. Thus, the regretful glances of an older generation of teachers at an upstart mode of teaching-learning appear to be tied in with an emotional attachment to the 'golden days' of a 'noble profession'.

2.4 'Openness' as an Organizational Response

At the present stage, the ODL systems in India, run mainly through the open universities and the directorates of distance education and function at par with the formal system by simply compiling the items of the normal curriculum into the 'correspondence' channel, that is, whatever can be committed to the printed word on the page. Designing of curriculum too ordinarily refers to the tried-and-tested pedagogic methods of classroom teaching. Practice however reveals that this consistently relegates the ODL curriculum to the lower slot in the repertory of courses. In the effort to widen the scope of 'openness', enrolments in the ODL are allowed as a matter of rule without any discipline-based bar so that the student who is admitted into the Eng. Lit. Programme, can often be an individual who is simply there for the love of learning. The most pertinent question that has to be asked therefore is—does curriculum structure tend to promote 'distancing' of the student from the knowledge-system called Eng. Lit.? From a considered stand-point this would seem to be the case since the older curricula has turned into a set of rigid criteria demanding purely 'literary' competence prior to admittance. At present, only to a limited extent does the course curriculum in ODL institutes not replicate that which does service in traditional programmes. As far as institutional directives go, ODL curricula are meant to be especially designed by collective course-setting to meet the requirements of students learning at a distance. To that extent, it can be argued that the brief history of a fairly young movement in modern pedagogical practices in India contains the scope for adaptations to current needs. Given that the ODL system incorporates, at least at present, innovative strategies in teaching, it should evidently be capable of transmitting much more than used to be assumed in the case of older curricula, which were naturally handicapped by the lack of resources. The enrichment of learning environments consequently must be ensured as an essential ingredient in the making of academic curricula. Arguably, then, ODL curricula not only stand to advantage in the promotion of interdisciplinarity but also as enriched programmes of study that allow students to gain familiarity with supplementary branches of knowledge. We would do well to remember that these ideals have long inspired scholars of the highest pedigrees.

The possibilities for innovative strategies in the teaching-learning processes opened up by the ODL system has been richly garnered in the universities of the developed countries. For example, the dual mode providers of Australia and New Zealand have been successfully functioning over the last thirty years. Similarly, distance education and e-learning in the traditional research universities in North America and UK have opened the doors to new international markets for their programmes. Clearly, therefore, in India also teaching-learning within the ODL framework can be seen as an organisational response to a new social landscape, unpacking areas in the academic transaction that impinge on and even upset the older assumptions behind higher education. Andrea Hope also argues, that a traditional Indian university boasts a huge population of off-campus students studying for their degree by correspondence. Instead we need to emphasize the contextual frames that colour such differences. The burden of responsibility towards social needs however stands as a distinct marker of the ODL system thus enjoining upon its educators to maintain practices reinforcing ideas of 'openness' with reference to the teacher-student relationship. Thus, a mainstay of ODL is the importance it should ideally attach to improvement and the continuous assessment of its learners through feedback arrangements. It does well for us to outline the logistical dimensions of ODL whose cost-effectiveness has finally supplied *the need* for 'Open' systems of learning. As a widely perceived panacea for speedy educational growth, 'Open' systems of learning present themselves with various opportunities to do research on the feasibility of the system as means to gain access to learning for all those who wish to learn. In pragmatic terms 'openness' translates into diverging practices of transmitting not merely knowledge but also philosophical values.

3. Conclusion

Though our desire that the radical potential of the ODL system in India be gradually discovered and thus be incorporated, its essentials urgently need reformulation whether this pertains to quality, openness, faculty orientation, or even the kind of student-teacher interaction it envisages in its scope. Programmes and courses are often validated via a double-pronged reference to established ones and to market-dictated demands. In determining the parity of courses, those offered in the ODL system often come out second-best based upon the fact that these rely on the doubtful efficiency of the design and delivery of learning materials, the non-availability of a prompt human feedback, the paring down of practical tutoring and the likely obsolescence of the learning materials. In economic terms, ODL initially meant more of mopping-up operations to augment revenues. Deprecatory baggage has thus haunted the birth-pangs of the ODL system in the modern developmental model operative in a country like India. However, through its gradual evolution, ODL could not remain secondary to the formal system. It is because there were almost insuperable difficulties related to the quality of faculty even in the formal system. As the formal system had to pull up its socks, 'correspondence' courses inserted question marks over the parity of the courses offered via two different modes. So, necessarily, the problems of 'distance' and 'openness' had to be revisited and re-defined. No Indian open university or directorate of distance education could claim validity unless this redefinition is carried out, and it is within this space that a 'theory' falls in place, stems from practice and revises commonly held notions. In order to achieve some grasp of a field, whose topographical contours seem yet vague and unclear in India, we need to theorize the idea of teaching-learning processes by considering not only the needs of specific target groups among the student body and the range of courses offered (these courses as answering community needs), but also and most importantly, the notion of 'openness' itself in the ODL systems. The bulk of the debates surrounding the topic have emerged in western academic institutions whose basic structures greatly differ from their Indian counterparts thus driving home the point that unless theory and context find a match between them, the dismal conditions in which Indian operations are currently conducted will get worse.

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Note 1:

As discussed in the PGDDE course materials provided by IGNOU, the restrictions may include admission restrictions, attendance restrictions, restrictions on the candidature for examinations, restrictions on the period of time to be devoted to a course, restrictions on the number of examinations given and taken in a year, restrictions on subject combinations for a particular degree, restrictions on the modes of didactic communication and the didactic tasks, etc.

Note 2:

The MDG report 2010 is the outcome of international cooperation, inspiring developmental efforts that have improved the lives of millions of people around the world. It is supposed that world leaders will meet again at the UN in New York to review progress, assess obstacles and gaps, and agree on concrete strategies and actions to meet the next Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

Note 3:

According to this concept the student is viewed as an empty account to be filled by the all-knowing teacher. However Paolo Freire suggests that a deep reciprocity be inserted into our notions of teacher and student. Freire describes the roles of the participants in the classroom as the teacher-student (a teacher who learns) and the student-teacher (a learner who teaches). Freirian philosophy has been highly influential in academic debates over the notion of 'participatory development'. Freire's emphasis on emancipation through interactive participation can be used as a rationale for the participatory focus of development, as it is held that 'participation' in any form can lead to empowerment of poor or marginalised groups. [Online] Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy_of_education

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