

Distance Education

Abstract

The article discusses distance education and its role in a democratic society arguing that for democratic society possibility of continued learning is essential. This is not only required for educating stalls, opening avenues for professional careers but also participating in the democratic conversations in the society. The driving for a of open education cannot be degree and certification but to give people the confidence to learn what they want.

It mentions the development of distance education and its gradual evolution in to a major possibility for continuing education particularly higher education. The paper clarifies the open and distance learning as a term and how the materials for these programs should be structured and what their nature including the language, style, exercise tasks and presentation should be.

It underlines the importance of dialogue in the learning process and low open and distance learning programs can build that possibility. It subjects that careful use of ICT can help in making such programs qualitatively more engaging and meaningful.

Background

Distance Education has become a part of human societies. Started with a limited purpose and limited scope in the 18th century, it has become a fairly widespread phenomena¹. The key purpose of Distance Education today can be said to be to open the avenue of continuing education for people in diverse places and diverse contexts². It is to make further learning possible for those who cannot be in a university or a regular college setting. Its nature thus needs to be such to allow the person to evolve a basket of courses as per her needs. The main purpose of a formal distance education program in the context of any principles of equity and justice has to be higher education. We would want all children till secondary education to go to full time school

even though, at the school stage some flexible programs must exist for those that may need. We would however focus this on the context of higher education and teacher education and in these explore the general features of distance education.

What is distance education:

There are many neat descriptions of distance education available today and the one main common aspect of all these is that distance education is meant to be a response to the need for continuing education after a long gap or engaging in continued education in a manner that is not regular and continuous. It also acknowledges the need for education not merely for adding skills and professional certification but also for

widening horizons and simply to learn more. This caters to and simultaneously suggests the need to give any person who so desires the opportunity to do a programme at her own pace and in an open ended manner and also encourage and inform others to do so as well. The open programs should also allow the learner to make choices of courses, their combinations and disciplines not normally taught together. For societies that are developing and growing, these provide opportunities to extend learning, widen knowledge and skills that maybe necessary for a variety of purposes. Learning opportunities that can make possible choice of changing direction of profession also can become available. Distance learning, therefore, necessarily should include flexibility and openness of options and extend the possibility of learning throughout ones' life. As mentioned above for any developing or developed society particularly for a democratic society, education and learning need to be for purposes wider than mere certification and eligibility for a professional career. Therefore, the fact that there is distance education available is of significance only when it can give people the confidence that they can continue to learn whenever they want to and almost whatever they want to, provided they are willing to make the necessary effort. Distance learning cannot only be about individual desire to learn what she wants but has also be organised around systems for guidance.

Higher education and distance education:

Higher education is available to many but the number of places available are far less than those who finish senior secondary. The choices available after school apart from higher education including general education, all kinds of engineering courses, medicine and

related health courses, commerce, management etc can not accommodate those who are looking for such opportunities. To take care of this schools of correspondence were set up in many universities. They admitted students who could not get admission to regular colleges and hence generally had students with lower ranks. The courses at these colleges were constructed in a manner similar to the other university courses. In order to be equivalent they had to have the same kind of content and structure of programs and even the same kind of assessment. That restricted the possibility that open programmes offered. We will discuss this more when we talk about the features, nature and possibilities of distance courses. In this context we will also discuss the teacher education courses and the need for open and distance learning for teacher education emerging out of the Verma1 committee report and the seminars on teacher development².

The challenge however, has continued to be that higher education, is even now fairly restrictive and unfortunately has continued to be a sieving mechanism. This has resulted in a situation where most of those pursuing higher education and those engaging them professionally look at it largely as an certification exercise. This is even more stark for many professional courses and their sites as some have become fairly non-rigorous for example in teacher education and even engineering. While, the non-rigour does not permeate to all universities and certainly not to all institutions they are particularly manifest in some of these. The consequent effect and the clamour for certification manages to vitiate many processes of education and often the system is twisted and bent to accommodate certification through all kinds of practices. Given

the urge and value for certification and in general situations only a scant respect to learning and building knowledge, the construction of courses by the universities and then also by the learners themselves does not lead to a cohesive well-integrated program. The nature of content, transactional processes and assessment all make learning memory focused and limited. Consequently this problem also besets distance education and there is not much difference between the issues of curriculum and governance processes of the two systems, given that they are both focussed on assessment. The system is not sufficiently cognisant of the need to promote higher education as an essential part of a growing democratic society. The majority of open education programs therefore are not constructed keeping its purpose in mind while ensuring relevance and quality. Distance education thus faces the dual challenge of being considered second-grade and not being able to effectively use the flexibility its format may allow it otherwise.

General features of distance education:

There are many definitions and form of distance learning but the main features are that this asynchronous and the taught and the teacher need not be physically in the same location. It may have face to face component just as the face to face courses may have some components that seem like distance mode but it is the overall composition that decides whether it is constituted as a distance course or a face to face course. The earliest distance courses were what were called the correspondence courses. By its very name it suggests a course that is completed using materials sent through post. The materials could have assignments to be completed and sent

back for review and assessment. They also had an introductory counselling session where the course outline and guidelines about how to go about doing the course were told to the student. There were also intermittent counselling sessions imagined where faculty would be available to respond to the questions and difficulties of the students. The quality and nature of these were varied for many reasons largely governed by the attitude to correspondence courses and the resources that could be allocated for it. It was in some thought to be a less expensive way of doing education without thinking of the possibilities this could offer.

As we can see from from above a distance education program has a nature that can be quite distinct from the face to face program. For example even when there are large numbers involved it can offer to the learner a flexibility to learn in her own manner, at her convenience and in the order of her choice. She can also curate her own program and make a portfolio of courses for her program that match her curiosity and her need. It makes possible for the program to be Learner-Centered in a emphatic manner. It is obvious the commitment and the motivation to struggle through is far more when the learner has made the option of choosing her own courses. It is both because it would give learner a feeling of empowerment and not a victim of have to do but also because she can choose areas that she likes and is good at.

The sense of engagement and the effort of making the choice would perhaps also help the student understand the program structure and motivate her. Clearly in distance programs the teaching learning process are very differently organised. They expect a lot more energy and initiative from the learner besides expecting

her to become self-reliant in her own journey of learning. The nature of the freedom and the way the programmes are set up allows an interested learner multiple ways of gathering experience around the ideas being transacted. Her wider ambit of interaction also allows her connections that link the ideas of the books and the syllabus to the experience in life. So an important attribute of the distance program is that it must attempt to make as varied educational experiences becomes available as is possible.

It is also obvious that for these programmes the role of the educators and their relationship to the students can be very important but quite different from that in a regular classroom. The nature of the learner, her motivation and state of preparedness also must be different. The programmes must have a component that makes the learners capable and confident of learning on their own. And this must include the ability to read and comprehend besides other abilities like the ability to schedule time for working on the materials and expectations of the program in her daily or weekly timetable. The educator in giving feedback and in the contact therefore has making the learner independent, self-disciplined and capable of responding to the tasks and understanding and working on the feedback given. The contact time must be spent on giving the learner an overview of the course as well as the basic elements that allow her to subsequently move forward on her own. The feedback on the assignments also has to be detailed and yet specific in what it expects and should almost be able to guide the student in a way that is like a close one-to-one conversation. The in-between follow-up contacts would aid in this task.

Having said that we realise that this kind of process would also make the

face to face programmes more effective and is certainly one of the goals of any educational program. We must also point out that over the year the nature of 'regular' and 'distance' programmes has been evolving and changing and there are no longer absolute separations in all cases. There are short term programs that are face to face and distance programs that have contact and synchronous presence of even a group of learners with the teacher and certainly some amount of synchronous presence in learning for the student and the faculty but yet there are broad distinctions that are there and make the nature of these programmes fairly distinct from each other. It is this difference that we talk about in the next section.

The fact is that over a period of time correspondence courses that were almost entirely designed as substitutes (to accommodate more numbers and cheaper cost) or as just some minor technical skill development courses have started evolving. With the addition of technological capability many forms of ICT usage to aid the transactional process have been discovered and are practised. A change in the understanding and acceptance of the distance programmes and their visualisation as in some senses an equivalent alternative with some pluses and some minuses, has slowly begun. The change is however, extremely slow and the common perception still continues to be that of 'not as good'. So what could be the reason for these perceptions. Some of these are arising out of anxiety of the unknown and the lack of faith in even most of the face to face or so called regular systems to govern themselves. So the fear is that for distance programs quality maintenance and quality check is even more difficult. There are also other challenges as well. We will consider the

attributes of the distance program and then look at the challenges they pose and the advantages they provide.

Challenges of Distance Education:

The distance education program whether with and without ICT is basically an individual learning program. The use of ICT makes some contact and virtual classroom like, peer like or tutoring sessions like interactions possible, but the major part of the programmes remain to be non-synchronous and non co-located learners and teachers. This implies the virtual absence during learning of discussion of any kind that would require the learner to formulate coherent statements to argue her position, think about multiple constructs and find logical reasons to agree or disagree to the challenges posed by the faculty to enable the learner to escape from the circular arguments and explanations that she may have constructed. In the absence of peer interactions, apart from lack of exposure to multiple perspectives around the concept of the course and to natural mutual scaffolding that happens in such interactions, there is also opportunity for immersion in to multiple perspectives and ways of life. A variety of backgrounds and circumstances among the learner group would widen their world-view. In essence distance programs offer little peer or teacher support. The distance program learners also lack even the possibility of natural mutual scaffolding, co-learning, widen world view and perspective and be encourages to even see interconnections between different papers, subjects and even domains of knowledge.

The students do not easily have access, certainly not easy access to books and materials. There are no libraries, laboratories, sports facilities and other such activities. Students

generally get restricted to the reading materials and assignments within that. Assessment processes in such programmes also may have less variety and frequency. We may add that while, some of this maybe overcome in some distance courses or that they maynot be available even in many of the regular programs, yet the nature of the opportunities are potentially different. To summarise the major concern is that there is no peer interaction, no opportunity to be reer or teacher scaffolded, no campus atmosphere and overall development, no academic dialogue and finally no one to push effort or to engage with.

The second challenge is creating possibilities of counselling and understanding the need for it and the resources that maybe required for it It requires no argument to believe that for conceptual understanding to develop, there must be space available for dialogue. There must be occasions where the learner can articulate and express what she has learnt and be able to engage with somebody and get feedback and occasionally even a different perspective to enrich her own view. Since, in a distance mode such opportunities would not be regualry available. It is, therefore, critical that spaces for such dialogues are created to some extent. Besides before starting reading the materials for distance education course the learners have to have an opportunity to get an insight into the nature of the course and its structure through an advanced organiser. This advanced organiser can be a written text in the materials or an induction interaction. The extent and nature of the induction interaction has two parameters that influence it. One is the nature of the course and its complexity and the second is the requirement of the learner and the possibility available for the interaction.

Distance education, however, needs to go beyond induction which has formulated such that presently no appropriate content or ideas, a facilitator, or tutor to implement them is available for such interactions. And all this requires setting up good and functioning counselling centers for which we need good counsellors and understanding of the role of counsellors and assignments

The third challenge after the setting up of reasonably endowed counselling centers with good counsellors, is to get the acceptance and understanding of these centers and their role. The general feeling about distance education is that this does not require any educator to work as a faculty as these there are self-learning programmes. The hangover from cheaper alternatives for students who are not good enough to come in the college or are for some other reason unable to be in classroom implies that these are still seen as second-grade. It does not matter if in reality some of the distance programmes are ensuring rigour and quality that many other face to face programs are not able to.

Advantages of Distance Education:

The challenges to distance education seem many, yet there are some clear advantages of distance education as well. The first advantage is that, these programmes necessitate the development of the ability to read, understand and summarise. A reasonable distance program expects and demands learner to make an effort to read with understanding, take notes and respond to assignments. It also develops the ability to seek answers from the materials provided and the habit of learning on one's own. However, to counter balance this advantage, in the regular university or college environment, is the dialogue available and therefore for distance mode as peer

platform to share ideas does not exist with the same possibility. These two points are important to keep in mind when discussing the quality of distance education.

The programmes can also catalyse the creation of learning materials that are specifically intended to allow students to learn on their own. It builds educational discourse around methods that can help better transactions in the class-rooms even in 'regular' face to face programmes. This includes for example, the nature of exercises and mechanisms for giving feed-back to the learners. The focus on self-learning and allowance for asynchrony enables a larger set of course options to be offered and also choices of courses that can be taken up by a student in her basket of credits. There is ofcourse flexibility in terms of the time table in the 24 hour clock but also in the monthly or semester/annual schedule for the learner. It is not necessary for the person to do the course with the same set of papers and not in the exactly the same time. These courses also help higher education reach those who are far away from the university and in case of creation of online sharing and chat classrooms lead to possibilities of interactions that can outlast the course as well.

The spirit of open distance learning is in the learners having a desire to add exposure to more areas. It can also function with the additional limited purpose of alternative mechanisms of certification but that should not become the driving purpose of such programs. The openness in the programs and constructions that combine different strands and also include learners with different academic backgrounds and exposure level implies multiple packages must be available. Constructing such combinations involves careful devising of learning materials, assignments and

assessment procedures. A task that is complex. The open programs are different from general correspondence courses as they allow for multiple academic backgrounds and multiple time spans. The flexibility and openness increases complexity of actually making a quality learning experience possible with reasonable support and meaningful assessment processes. Materials used for the programs need to be able to address this challenge of diversity. The possibility of using Information and communication technology (ICT) can make possibility of handling diversity easier. We look at possibilities of this in a later section.

Materials of ODL:

Distance education is primarily through materials and hence there need to be produced carefully. The learners may not have access to many other library materials. In the regular or face to face stream the students have generally access to so much more. This potential however, is hardly utilized. Given the in principle availability for 'regular' students it is crucial to ensure the materials are readable, correct and relevant.

We must also recognise that while there are many possibilities of using online exchange and today the sharing of audio-visual materials and online interactions could soon become feasible this would substantially enhance the possibilities in distance education to allow for the kind of programmes and manner of interaction mentioned above, for the moment, however, for which the quality parameters may be differently defined, we have to still rely on printed materials that would be available to learners of the programme. The quality of these materials and the kind of opportunities that they provide to the learner to engage with the texts, therefore, become very important. It is

crucial that the materials are not dense and abstract but have a fluid flow. They must use many examples that build in the experience of the learner. It is very easy to almost rote remember texts and therefore materials that have a focus only on giving correct definitions, facts and correct lists can only lead to a greater amount of material memorised. Distance education, therefore, forces us to create material that reflect the objectives of higher education clearly. Unlike regular classrooms where the task of transaction and giving students a feel of the objectives of the course rests with the teachers, here it is the material that has to carry the load.

It is also clear that the students of distance learning cannot have an access to libraries. It is, therefore, important that the materials reflect a spectrum of views and scope. The materials that are being produced need to be engaged with by the learner. In the absence of peers and regular tuition, the texts itself must help the learner, discover ways of creating her conceptual framework. The task in the material need to, therefore, be of a kind that help the learner reflect on the portion read and also identify the key ideas in it. She needs to be able to recognize what is expected to be learnt and given opportunities to assess by herself whether she has grasped it. There must be practice items within the text of the material such that the learner can pause and reflect on what she has read and attempt to respond to what she has read. The self-learning material therefore needs to have regular exercises and tasks interspersed.

The nature of tasks and exercises is also something that deserves attention. We also need to have exercises that give the learner confidence that she can learn something from the material. As already said they also need to be such that help the learner understand what is to be learnt. The third aspect that

needs to be covered by the tasks is to bring in the experiences of the learner related to concepts being discussed. In this they need to also analyse their experiences carefully and develop a deeper sense of it. The exercises and tasks would help in conceptual development much more, if they also bring in the earlier experiences of the learner or expect her to gather concrete observations and experiences within the framework of the texts.

The second aspect of dialogue is that while going through the materials, the learner needs feedback and alternative view points. Distance courses therefore need to have a mechanism by which this can be provided. Good distance education programmes need to have assignments that are to be supported regularly and assessed. These assignments need to be vigorous in providing feedback to the learner and helping her learn. They also need to be able to point out to her where she should improve her performance. Besides feedback on assignments, mechanisms to share questions and articulate understanding must be set up. The mechanisms of counsellors requires appropriate preparations such that the counsellors are capable of both, the academic inputs as well as prepares for pedagogical interaction keeping the needs of distances learners in mind. The process of scaffolding and support in distance education is vital but extremely neglected except in some rare courses.

They have to be presented with a clarity, preciseness and comprehensiveness that encourages the learner to develop her own conceptual framework and ask questions. The materials need to be able to pose issues to the learners such that they can relate to them and the materials also need to give the foundational ideas of that discipline to help the learner

engage with the questions posed. The teams that should produce the material, therefore, need to have both appreciation of this dual requirement as well as the experience and capability to create such materials. Many of the materials used by distance learning Universities will not satisfy these criteria.

Information and Communication Technology and Open Distance Learning:

While Information and communication technology (ICT) has tremendous possibilities its potential gets multiplied many times with the availability of the computer and intranet. And the expansion of ICT as interactive computer technology sums up the immense possibility that ICT can unleash in a distance program and converts it to a partial face to face program. The ways in which it can influence the open distance learning are many. It can change the nature of materials, nature of teaching-learning process, nature and possibility of interaction among student of a particular course and also with students of other distance education courses. It also effects the way assessment can be done and makes possible the shift towards better assement and towards how assessment should ideally be done. In fact much more than the mundane even though important use of the computer system to receive textual materials to read or information about contact programs, assignments etc., ICT can be used for purposes that enhance the quality and in fact the nature of the materials themselves. The course materials can now include short and long films, power points, interactive sessions with machines that can provide some inputs to support learning, systems of sharing assignments and getting feedback on them and even having chat sessions

that are virtual discussion groups or small classrooms. In case needed, live or pre-recorded lecturers with visuals to illustrate can be also provided. The availability of ICT takes us far beyond just the audio lessons or beamed television sessions.

It is clear that these additions change the quality of the transaction process and the materials considerably. The availability of ICT can also be useful for regular face to face programs but for the distance programs the opportunity that can be created for supplementary support is of a different order of magnitude. The possibility of virtual classrooms, one to one feedback on assignments and chats with faculty and peers open new vistas. There is some need of synchronous availability of the participants but the locations need not be the same. The assignments and feedback exchange made multiple iterations of the assignment possible. From the above it is clear a purposeful use of ICT has the potential to significantly widen the scope and improve open courses provided it is used with care and wisdom and not a short cut for all processes.

There are however, certain infrastructural challenges in the use of ICT. Its larger use requires the availability of a computer, a network that allows for web access with a reasonably good speed and computer literacy. There is also currently a lack of appropriate content that can use the full potential of the ICT besides the lack of interactional expectation in the transactional processes as well. The acceptance of open courses, their curation in a manner that uses the technological possibility actively and meaningfully also requires a lot of thinking, exploration and vigorous evaluation of the processes and ideas tried. ICT mitigates some of the challenges of just a distance

correspondence course and as its accessibility improves and better utilisation happens, the full potential may become visible. For example there is yet very little possibility for transverse entry into courses. Even in open universities sometimes the prerequisites defined exclude a lot of people from taking those courses. There are some other barriers due to suspicions about the open system itself. Most science and technology courses, teacher preparation courses, medical and nursing courses and perhaps all courses preparing people for professions are not allowed to the open universities. The face to face universities not only would not accept a transverse movement from an open university to their university but may be reluctant to admit them to courses dependent upon having passed the previous course. The universities count the hours spend for each component of the course and match them with their regular courses. The open system is also beset with the problem of higher education performing the role of a sieve. And since the fact is that the sieving operation is not based on characteristics of understanding or on the basis of learning to think ahead, there is yet no way for a large majority to escape rote learning even being in the open university system.

Assessment:

All education particularly higher education requires an assessment programme that not only provide feedbacks to the learner but also judges whether she is capable of certain level of understanding and articulation in that area. Distance mode demands an ability to learn on ones own and therefore needs to have an element where the ability to self-learn is tested. It also aims to bring the experiences of the learner in contact with the content of the discipline and therefore

the assessment must also look at how far has the learner has developed an ability to do that. There also needs to be a mechanism to support and scaffold the learner such that she appreciates the expectations from the nature of assessment. In my experiences as working with some distance education courses it is evident that learners are not aware of the purpose of the courses and how they would be assessed. Most learners assume that distance learning programmes require remembering texts and in fact often may be believing that they would be allowed copying from the materials during the examinations. The nature of questions in distance learning because of the clear identification of the 'textbook' requires that we force the learners to think and not find questions that can straightway be copied or written down verbatim from the materials.

Summary:

To summarise, for a democratic society open learning is an insight for that distance education has a very important role. However, these rules need to be clearly defined and not reduced to mere certification exercises. The tremendous

possibility of distance learning need to be harnessed and utilized properly. It should not be seen as a way of certification for a larger number in a hurry. Should not be seen as a rival to regular college going educational process. It is a complementary system to add value and reach. The care with which assignments and contact need to be treated and assessment done, needs to be re-energised periodically. This cannot be merely seen as a cheaper option for reaching higher education certification to a large group. While numbers of students in a course and in the whole university is an indication of its usefulness, a very high number also indicates lax standards and hence the course being viewed as a quick certification model. Distance mode has to focus on provide flexible reach and an openness. The acceptance of the open and distance learning systems and development of parameters that assess its quality and its comparison with other programs can increase the scope and the number of students opting for it.

Short hand in 1728

Univ. program Univ. of London 1858 –
In USA 1888

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