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Learner-Institute Interaction and Third World Dilemmas

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Abstract

This article describes the results of an inquiry undertaken to identify the learner-institute interaction in a teacher education programme offered in India. The purpose of this study was two-fold ---to investigate some of the factors influencing learner-institute interaction as perceived by the adult in-service trainees and to see how these factors were related to the problem of isolation faced by distance learners. The study also reports how distance administrators tried to remove some of these factors and learned to accept others as socio-cultural constraints to interaction.

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1. Introduction

Interaction is one of the most important components of any learning experience (Dewey 1938; Vygotsky 1978). It has been recognized as one of the major constructs in distance education research (Holmberg 1983; Moore 1989; Wagner 1994, McIssac and Gunawardena 1996). Moore (1989) made the distinction between three types of interaction: learner-content, learner-instructor, and learner-learner. Hillman, Willis, and Gunawardena (1994) proposed a learner-interface interaction as all other discussions of interactions had failed to acknowledge the fact that for any interaction to take place the learner has to interact with the medium.

With the emergence of the virtual campus, there is perhaps a need to propose a new interaction paradigm: *learner-institution*. Educating in an asynchronous environment, the students must be connected to the institution. The institution's culture and support services must be identifiable and provided, allowing for a collaborative learning environment. This happens to be a current topic of debate with little research and uniformity on how it is to be accomplished. Since each institution has a unique culture

and special needs, a unique system design must be developed that is tailored for the institution.

The main thrust of this study is (a) towards discovering factors which influence learner-institute interaction, (b) to see how these factors are related to a sense of 'isolation' felt by the distance learner, and (c) how we (the institute) could remove some of them by establishing some kind of learner-institute interaction which is unique to our region and culture. This is done in the context of an in-service, distance education teacher training programme, which reveals certain emotional and psychological demands of adult learners expressing primarily the increasing need for a **learner-institute** interaction. This is a somewhat dangerous territory to enter as these demands of the distance learner are personal and raise questions about values and beliefs that are not always subject to empirical inquiry or offer definitive answers. The paper draws on experience from developing, delivering and tutoring courses with students from India and neighboring countries.

The paper is divided into five sections. Section one is the introduction. Section two introduces the autonomous in-service training programme. Section three describes the characteristics of the distance trainees. Section four discusses the mode of collecting the data and analyses the data. Section five examines the implications of the study and suggests recommendations for future distance education programmes.

2 The Programme

The in-service programme, discussed in this study, was started because there was a felt need for taking teacher training programmes to the doorsteps of the teachers, and to enable them to grow and develop at their own pace. The only way to achieve this, in a vast and heavily populated country like India, was through the distance mode of teaching/training. The independent, self-directed structure of the in-service training programme suits teachers, as all of them engage voluntarily in this training programme. The programme involves a combination of independent study (mostly print based) and opportunities for interaction through on-campus contact sessions. The interaction is restricted between staff and students and among students, despite the use of telephones (and e-mail to some extent). Because these interactions are considered important the students are required to attend contact programmes, which provide face-to-face contact. Access to learning resources such as library, multimedia and computing facilities is also limited. Such conditions mean that for many distance learners, learning is heavily dependent on the printed material they receive.

The need

Adult learners, as we already know, have a wide variety of reasons for pursuing learning at a distance: constraints of time, distance, and finances, the opportunity to take courses or hear outside speakers who would otherwise be unavailable, and the possibility to come

in contact with other students from different social, cultural, economic, and experiential backgrounds.

The learning environment

The conditions of learning are quite different for distance learners and affect learning outcomes significantly. In India, as in many developing countries, most distance learners have no private study space at home. Family, community, religious and work obligations often take precedence over studying, and although the family may support the decision to study, they cannot always help and sometimes do not even fully understand the students' problems and needs. The isolated student is unable to get academic or psychological support from the informal networks that are perhaps a source of strength in other countries.

3 The Distance Learner

Most trainees teach at the secondary and tertiary level and are within the age group of 25-45 years. Their experience ranges from 2-15 years. Majority of them are married and have two to three children and old parents to take care of. They are, therefore, most unwilling to attend a month long contact session. The men and women ratio has changed over a period from 60:40 in early nineties to 50:50 in mid nineties and 40:60 percent respectively, in recent years. The trainees enroll for the course in the hope of improving

their efficiency as teachers of English and to become proficient users of English. Their most regular reading is at the level of the local dailies. Many of them cannot speak in English and do not have any exposure to English. Most of them are economically poor and worry about the cost of books/materials or traveling to attend the contact programmes and may not be willing to buy audio-video cassettes. Many of them are non-autonomous passive learners with a defeatist attitude. They are most unwilling to change; some are too indifferent while others too complacent. They have low self-esteem and a negative attitude towards themselves. They are scathing about anything they regard as “unrealistic” in our training programmes and may not want to complete the training, unless they are convinced about the relevance of the course to what they perceive as their needs. Almost all of them perceive training through distance as “second rate” when compare to the training through the face-to-face mode. All of them claim to suffer from isolation and would like to have a trainer around all the time.

4 The survey

Despite the programme being a self-directed, independent and autonomous one, it was found that trainees did suffer from a sense of isolation. This information was gathered by keeping in touch with learners (doing various distance learning courses) through letters and personal communication. As distance administrators we know that, no self-directed training should enhance this because trainees learn from coming together for professional development activities and shared problem solving experiences. A questionnaire was,

therefore, given to the trainees in order to find out factors that contributed towards their sense of isolation so that we (the institute) could remove some of it.

The survey deals with only a small segment of psycho-emotional needs and only from a learner's perspective. The questionnaire was given to trainees who had come to attend the final contact-cum-examination programme. These trainees were doing a Post Graduate Diploma in the Teaching of English (PGDTE) and had already undergone a one-year training programme (Post Graduate Certificate in the Teaching of English) through distance. Eighty out of ninety nine trainees (80% of those enrolled) who had appeared for the final examination completed the questionnaire. This small sample means that, while there were commonalties among these eighty learners, the findings may not be generalizable to other learners from developing countries. The self-reported data was not challenged or probed. No attempt was made to verify that what these learners said was actually what they felt (for example, through observations, or interviews with learners or family members). Further, the learners in this survey were self-selected and there may be significant differences between them and non-respondents.

The questionnaire was framed, with a view to things that happen in and outside the classroom and how they affect the trainees. Four things were considered most important (a) the classroom interaction in its various forms - between the trainer and the trainee as well as the trainee and other trainees, (b) the learner-institute

interaction and its impact in various forms- the buildings, the head of the institute, tutors, peers, technical and non-technical man-power, the intense academic atmosphere, library, recreation facilities, and so forth, (c) the learner-content interaction where the intellectual connectivity, collaborative learning and the feasibility of the 'content' in practice were examined, and (d) the socio-economic, political, cultural, and religious constraints within which the third world countries function. It was assumed that perhaps the absence of some of these factors may have led to the feeling of isolation felt by the in-service distance trainees.

The data analysis showed that some of the factors affecting learner-institute interaction, as perceived by the adult, in-service learners were related to psycho-emotional, socio-cultural, moral and ethical issues which do not lend themselves to neat and tidy technical solutions. However, if we examine learning and the learners within the cultural and regional context, we can begin to understand some of the values, attitudes, beliefs and needs of the distance learners.

Some of the psychological needs that were met by the programme were identified as follows:

- Nearly 71% of the trainees admitted that they were "all alone" while studying and that the training programme filled up a psychological gap (96%), an intellectual gap (100%) "we do not have friends to discuss with...", a physical gap (96%)

(that is, they found that they were not alone in their pursuit of a change in their classroom behaviour, management, and so forth), and even an emotional gap (50%) in their lives.

- For 97% of the trainees the training programme had helped in establishing a link with the outside world.
- The training programme had removed boredom for 92% of the trainees, and
- For 94% the trainees the training programme had fulfilled a need to relate to people “in many ways.”

In addition, the trainees volunteered to do the following:

- 96% of the trainees were willing to reply immediately to a letter from trainers/tutors to continue or sustain a dialogue, and
- 89% of the trainees were willing to reply immediately to a letter from a fellow trainee (but were hesitant to take the initiative).

An analysis of the data further illustrated that many psycho-emotional, socio-cultural and academic needs of the distance learners were not met by the distance programme. This in turn led to their dissatisfaction with the course and an increased sense of isolation.

Psycho-emotional needs: The findings suggest that many *psycho-emotional* needs of the distance learners were not met by the programme thus illustrating a lack of learner-institute interaction. For example, the trainees wanted the institute to do the following:

- 60% of them could not discuss or even talk about the training programme with their family members. They wanted the institute to reply to personal letters...

If the institute cares for me it would reply to my personal letters...that will help students like me in doing the course better.

Personal letters may be replied by the tutor though its quite difficult...it may create a good rapport between the tutor and the participant.

- Many of them wanted the trainer to write his/her full name on the assignments instead of just the initials.... "the name also creates an image...makes the teacher real"
- When asked how many of them felt 'isolated' while learning, 49% said that they did feel isolated...

Recorded audio cassettes ...one or two...might make us feel well and reduce isolation.

Comments on the assignments are abrasive ... very putting off for people doing a lonely job...which a distance education course is.

- The training programme through distance was not considered good because they could not *see* it in the form of a trainer, building.

The building does create an image in the mind about the institution...we know the place we are studying in...

- They would like to receive a birthday card from the trainer (64%) “it would make me very happy”, and
- Many (85%) would like to have the photograph of the trainer/course writer on the materials sent to them.... “I could then feel the presence of a teacher...”

Socio-cultural needs: Some of the socio-cultural needs expressed by the learners were as follows:

Almost all trainees would have liked to know details about the personal lives of their trainers. Some of the things they were interested in were: (a) the mother tongue of the trainer (67%), (b) academic qualification and the teaching experience of the trainer (76%), (c) the place (city, state) where the trainer comes from (77%), (d) the research interest of the trainer (61%), (e) has the trainer been abroad? (65%), (the tag ‘foreign returned’ is considered prestigious in the society).(f) would like to know if the trainer had a foreign degree (68%), (g) the profession of the trainer’s spouse (a working spouse (generally wife) adds to the prestige value) (77%), (h) the number of languages the

trainer knows (70%), and (i) many were interested in knowing the number of children the trainers/tutors had. In addition,

- Some (men) did not like women trainers and some did not approve of ‘young’ trainers.

A very young type would bother me as I regard myself as a mature and experienced person. I would not be able to take her correction or criticism at their face value.... wouldn't be able to let go of my opinions on a matter in deference to her.

- The women trainees preferred discussing their professional/personal problems only with women trainers/tutors.
- 61% of the trainees (men) would like to be in touch with fellow trainees (but the women do not approve of this).
- 95% of the trainees would like to have the address of the trainers who lived nearby (but the trainers/tutors do not approve of this).
- 88% of the trainees would like to receive personal notes from the trainer encouraging them to submit assignments, etc.

Some of the *academic factors* which the learners claimed affected their learning were issues like:

- 60% of the trainees would like to have the recorded voice of the trainer introducing the course.
- 70% of them would like to have a pre-paid telephone and fax facility available to them.
- 97% of them would like to participate in seminar and workshops
- 78% of them would like to start the programme with a contact session, and
- 96% of them would like to have a forum where they could exchange views, etc.

Most students believe that they need some face-to-face contact and peer group interaction to help them develop a sense of belonging and to identify with the programme and the university. This was perceived as a way to help transform perspectives and enhance professional socialization. Spending time on the campus was seen as the ideal way to accomplish this. The traditional student had a clear identity and role which they thought they did not have. This is challenged in distance education programmes, where “the focus shifts from being a member of an institution to being an individualized learner.” (Edwards, 1996:8).

What are these distance learners telling us? Most of their needs are universal needs. All of us would like to have such support from our tutors and the institute. These needs become more important when we see them in the light of learners who are isolated in time, distance and recourses.

5 Implications

Adult learners, as Fraser & Haughey (1999, p.51) suggest:

bring some unique challenges because of their complex lives, they have more personal problems, are more demanding, and require more attention and time than other students. These are students who come back to study after quite awhile. One of the challenges is to try to keep them happy.

The study has revealed just this. We need to build a partnership with these learners and we need to be careful to listen to what they are saying about every aspect of what we are delivering to them. As managers we also have to understand that often the way things are done is as important as *what* is done--and indeed *who* it is done by. We have to remember that the sophisticated learner who is familiar with the web will take care of herself but the poor, the remote, the only literate member of the family are the ones who really need our help. They are the ones whom we must be really concerned about. We must be careful about what mode of delivery, what technology, if any, we are using for learners who are isolated because of time, distance and recourses.

We tried (unsuccessfully) to build into the system (after conducting the survey) some of the needs identified by the distance learners. These are discussed below.

We tried to introduce an optional mid term contact session to increase opportunities of interaction but we found that only 25-30 out of nearly 500 on our rolls attended these sessions. Most of the learners could not afford the time and the money to come twice for the contact programme. We had to discontinue with this practice. We launched an in-house newsletter (distributed free of cost) to help participants exchange views and hear 'other voices' but we ended up begging our learners to contribute to the newsletter. At best we got some poems based on our programme. The newsletter died a premature death. Most of the trainers/tutors were not willing to give their home addresses and telephone numbers as we found that tutors were disturbed at odd hours (the telephone rates are cheapest late at night!). Similarly trainers were not willing to write and respond to personal problems of the learners. When we tried giving peer addresses to learners we had to face irate fathers and husbands who did not want their daughters or wives to be disturbed by 'men' participants.

The social structure is such that even women participants do not want to keep in touch with men participants. In fact, most women go without counseling as most of the tutors employed in distance education set ups are men.

This study has several specific implications for those hoping to employ DE at the university level. These trainees have told us rather clearly that they need human support in various forms. The participants are concerned with the limited amount of interaction

with individual students. They want caring attitude from tutors when interacting with them both orally and in writing. It is important to reflect that most students substantially familiar and comfortable with the traditional models of instruction and learning are in need of scaffolding for the new models that distance education offers. Without connectivity, distance learning degenerates into the old correspondence course model of independent study. The student becomes autonomous and isolated, procrastinates, and eventually drops out. Effective distance education should not be an independent and isolated form of learning.

These research findings have been able to prove only one thing: that affective factor play a crucial role from the point of view of the learner. That, there is a need for participants to be in physical contact with each other and with there tutors. Distance educators have to take care of the socio-psychological make up of the clientele.

We have to learn to provide for the learners' already established ideas, prejudices, attitudes, beliefs and value systems and individual learning styles. This requires a great deal of sensitivity, creativity and imagination on the part of the tutor and the administration. It is extremely important that combing current learning theories and current technologies is approached with a pragmatic eye towards efficient and better learning. Only then the true potential of DE can be realized and appropriately used.

It is hoped that these research findings will stimulate further discussion, reflection and debate about the role of the institute on this sensitive issue.

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