

INDIAN JOURNAL OF OPEN LEARNING

VOLUME 10

NUMBER 2

MAY 2001

Participatory Learning and Discourse on Local and Global Culture of the Disadvantaged

Shobhita Jain



Indira Gandhi National Open University
Maidan Garhi, New Delhi-110068 (India)

Participatory Learning and Discourse on Local and Global Culture of the Disadvantaged

SHOBHITA JAIN

Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, India

Abstract: *Within the domain of strategies and policies of education and training, this paper focuses on the agency of learners and promotion of continuous dialogue/interaction among the partners for generating learning resources. The partners are: the learners, faculty members (referred here as course managers), academic collaborators, information technology specialists and employers or potential employers of learners. The networking among partner presumably takes place at different levels and in different sites of the Project –SAVINI*

The first part of the paper deals with the proposed models of participatory pedagogy, which follows the strategy of empowering the agency of learners by recognizing their role in designing a flexible learning system, using the technique of open space dialogue. Bringing the learners to a level playing field through the process of networking for sharing experiences and resources enables the course managers to generate a sufficiently higher level of interactivity that boosts a learning outcome beneficial to the learners as well as the other partners. This is aided by an effective use of available tools of user-friendly information technology by the learners themselves.

The second part of the paper discusses the author's experiments in participatory pedagogy, during the course of planning, developing and launching several programmes of study at IGNOU. These helped the evolution of the policy of developing interactive and group-centered learning through converging open (read interactive and collaborative) learning and distance-(read individualized, customized and virtual) modes of education. The author has followed a path of developing the multi-media learning package with the learners, accepting them as the 'experts', who would decide about learning methods, learning outcomes and evaluation methodologies.

Concluding part of the paper emphasizes that the basis and rationale of the above strategy and policy are the dynamic relationship between the participatory process as a means (to achieve the goal of capacity building of learners) and the participatory process as an end (to empower the learners so that they can meaningfully participate in the development process).

Introduction

Learner in Open and Distance Learning

By and large, providers of distance education all over the world construct programmed learning according to the needs of the autonomous learner. We are familiar with a general list of terms, referring to generation of course materials as self-instructional materials (SIMs), self-regulating learning (SRL), self-controlled learning (self-organized learning (SOL), self-motivated learning (SML), etc. In IGNOU we, recently made a shift from self-instructional material (SIMs) to self-learning materials (SLMs). All these terms essentially refer to the autonomy of learners to choose their own time, place and pace of learning.

*SAVINI is the Hindi acronym of *Sahabhagi Vikas Niyojan* (Participatory Development Planning)

The point of departure in the case of participatory learning model is its focus on capacity building of learners in relation to i) each other, ii) providers of learning material and iii) society in general. The model looks beyond the goal of catering to autonomy of individual learners. The concern here is with professional needs of those groups of learners, who are not yet able to access what is known as lifelong learning. I argue that all such learners would serve their educational needs better, if they take part collectively not only in planning, negotiating, fulfilling and evaluating their learning contracts but also contribute to generate learning resources. This is in line with the dominant understanding of participation that entails the incorporation of local people's perceptions and knowledge into programme making. In our case, this implies using the concept of autonomy in a broader sense, whereby the learners join hands with teachers to initiate the entire process of conceiving, planning, developing and delivery of a programme of study and then devise ways of sustaining it in the future. In other words, learning is not just confined to knowing, it is about doing with what one knows.

Learning is a two way process. A teacher with all the beautifully structured learning material can do nothing with it, unless there are learners to make use of it. If learners are vital to what teachers do, it makes sense to seek their participation in the business of creating learning paths. Instead of making the learners 'objects' of pedagogy, our strategy is to perceive learners as 'subjects'. As can be seen later, this perception entails a wholesale involvement of learners in structuring their path of learning and, in addition, it offers possibilities of teachers learning from their students. The interaction or dialogue between the learners and teachers, if it takes place in a levelled playing field, gives them equal opportunities to learn from each other. Dialogue in participatory learning revolves around interaction, which becomes an arena for those who share their common concerns about the quality of life around them. As both the teachers and the learners experience the same historic time and space, and represent cultures in fragments, their interaction gives impetus to creating a leveling field. The ostensible purpose is to prepare a programme of study or a learning package and this may be sufficient for providers of courses. But along the way, the process of interaction takes over the goal of creating a learning package. The questions of preparing the learning material *per se* and its authorship seem to become somewhat irrelevant. The matters of planned development issues or conscious social change assume importance, taking the learning process to self-management. Let us elaborate this point.

The concept of learner's role in constructing the learning path serves the purpose of providing the vital link between the twin concepts of **dialogue** or interaction between the learner and the teacher and **structure** of different courses / programmes of study. Hence the need for learner centric or proactive participation of learners as a model to achieve a more integrated process of lifelong learning. This is what would enable learners to play their roles meaningfully and effectively in society.

Why Focus On Dialogue?

My focus on the dialogue image of open and distance learning is a response to the quagmire of development process in such developing countries as India. In a developing country, it appears, that both the learners and their teachers are caught in the movement of historical events. This is not to say that the same would not be the case in developed countries. The point to emphasise here is that critical events overpower the *status quo* and force us to go beyond them and look for alternatives. Local, regional, national and global movements of critical events effect both the learners and the distance teacher. In this sense, they sail in the same boat, to become partners in a journey to a common destination. Dialogue with the

partner is most often a mirror of one's own self. Encountering inevitable consequences of fast changing social settings, (for us engagement with open and distance learning and the ensuing interaction or dialogue with the learners) is more than just producing academic programmes of study. The engagement assumes the shape of interactive dialogue, which is different from seeking cooperation of the subject (anthropology/sociology) experts in preparing a learning package. What emerge are interactive situations, emphasising different levels of partnership between different actors, including the distance teachers, who have also the task of figuring out the nature of their engagement in the whole process (Jain, 2000). In more than one sense, preparation of course material gets connected with the larger issues of conscious social change and each one of the players has to figure out one's role in the whole process of educating the self with a purpose of social relevance or doing something with what one knows.

Role of the Distance Teacher

Speaking of the role of course managers, the distance teachers need not command the position of a central or key actor in the process of creating the learning package. With a different trajectory of structuring the programme of study, it is suggested that the distance-oriented teacher should initiate a dialogue for interactivity with the potential learners (in the present case they are development practitioners working in rural/tribal areas). The current method and theory of open and distance learning, look at the potential learners of academic programmes as objects of our engagement. We have to take them as participants, who have their own agency and who may be equally interested and often also competent to contribute to generating learning materials. The question is – Can there be a dialogue in which the erstwhile objects of our enterprise not only become subjects but also contribute to it? Is it a realizable goal? As the interactivity process helps us take account of reciprocity of perspectives among those interacting, we may treat it as a participatory process. Part II of this paper explains the process in the context of my engagement in developing course materials at IGNOU.

Agency of Potential Learners

Our discussion of participatory process will become clear, when contextualized in concrete situations. I hope that the following documentation of the process of preparing the course material of programmes of study at Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) will illustrate the points made above. Since 1988 I have been involved in this process, which began with development of six undergraduate courses in Sociology and two certificate level courses, namely, i) Participatory Forest Management, ii) Participatory Project Planning. Coming to IGNOU from a conventional university teaching background, I attended several workshops to get training in the teaching methods of distance education. The training made obvious the value of well-prepared instructional material with built-in interactivity. The new tool was indeed an asset in the hands of the teaching community at IGNOU. Each component of distance education required professional expertise. In due course, with the shift from distance teaching to open learning, the stress at IGNOU has now come to focus on development and utilization of human resources. Without undermining the importance of offering programmes of study that are not explicitly vocational or professional, many of us felt the need to widen the scope of higher education and construct learning paths to offer short cycle programmes of study. For example, the Certificate Programme in Participatory Forest Management aimed at enhancing the professional competency level in the area of social-cultural aspects of forest management. A mix of academics, foresters and NGO

activists collaborated in developing the courses while the evaluation methodology followed the strategy of open — type of term — end examination that was designed to give the learners ample opportunity of field-based activity. After completing the course development, the realization hit me rather hard, because, though I used the word 'participatory' in the title of the programmes of study, there was precious little by way of actual participation of learners in its development. I followed the usual procedure that IGNOU had evolved for its academic programmes. The word 'participatory' referred to collaborative forestry only in a symbolic or rhetorical way. I was disappointed with myself that I could not go beyond the straight and narrow path. Even while trying to reach out to other than undergraduates, my approach was rather hidebound. I had little interaction with potential learners of the programmes of study. I decided to learn from my mistakes. In approaching the so-called much 'felt need' of capacity-building of development practitioners in rural areas, I resolved to first have face-to-face meetings with the potential learners and listen to their experiences. It was not certain if this approach would yield any constructive outcome.

I was, however, keen on unpacking the term "participation" into a ladder of participation (cf Arnstein, 1969), which would eventually lead to larger degrees of decision-making by learners themselves. The idea was to enter the dynamic whereby participatory approach (as a means) may evolve in meaningful participation (as an end in itself) of learners in design and delivery of programmes of study. This, in turn, was to provide the leveling of playing field, or treating the learner and teacher on equal footing. In this sense, disadvantage has been viewed here in terms of the lack of equal base for participatory action. The very idea of using participation as a key issue and forming a chain of continuous dialogue with learners meant a focus on learners as groups rather than as individuals. Encouraging participants to share perceptions and experience, I was to create a non-threatening environment by responding to ideas and comments of others. Comparing and contrasting the range of opinions across several groups helped understanding based on discussions among the participants. This was different from testing a pre-determined hypothesis or theory. I was trying to understand the learning process through the eyes and hearts of learners themselves. The process of development and delivery of the certificate program of study in Participatory/ Project Planning or SAVINI (the Hindi acronym of the programme) culminated in what I am calling participatory learning model. To explain the model, I will now provide details of the SAVINI experiment. SAVINI is an acronym of *Sahabhagi* (Participatory) *Vikas* (Development) *Niyojan* (Planning), the Hindi title of the programme. At present the programme is run for the development workers of select NGOs in the States of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Uttaranchal and Uttar Pradesh. SAVINI reflects innovative paths to engagements of creating learning materials and leads to a possible shift in our understanding of the role of the teacher in open and distance education. The following description of the process of preparing an open learning package shows how the concept of SAVINI took shape with active involvement of potential learners, who were in this case the village-based development workers with no formal education.

In this journey of twenty-one months, the first step was the identification of the need for such study material and the next step was about the strategies and mechanisms of working out the syllabus, preparing the courses and their delivery to the learners. Finally we were to deal with evaluation and reformulation of the course contents according to local biases. The process of running the programme of study and through it the training of development workers would hopefully lead to the ultimate appropriation of the whole process of

planning participatory development at grass roots by the rural/tribal communities themselves.

Much of participation occurred during group discussions, where the most silent-and-unlikely to raise their voices-type of participants among the potential learners gave new ideas. Their suggestions found prominent place in the course design. How did this actually happen?

Networking, a Mechanism to Reach Out to the Potential Learners

Sitting in our New Delhi campus of IGNOU, it was not easy to contact the potential learners of our proposed programme of study and without a direct dialogue with them it was not possible to say with any certainty if the idea of developing a programme of study would be acceptable to them. As large numbers of development workers are employed by small and big NGOs, it was considered useful to get in touch with select NGOs who practice participatory development and operate as umbrella organizations with several smaller NGOs affiliated to them. Inviting these NGOs for a preliminary discussion proved to be a small beginning of a much longer process of negotiations. Before I go on to describe the contents of the regional meetings, let me also discuss some of the assumptions of SAVINI experiment, underlying our engagement with (not for) development workers (operating in rural areas among the marginalized and disadvantaged sections of society).

Assumptions

Alternatives to modernity, to capitalist enterprise and to the current forms of development are all over the world under formation and these provide a new lead for reformulating agency and alternative approaches in their socio-cultural, economic and environmental aspects. Most of us generally speak of the lack of will on the part of political powers. Instead, we need to articulate changed politico-economic conditions that would support the new subjectivities and alterities. Anthropology (my discipline) has the advantage of having studied differences and therefore its practitioners can easily isolate those instances of articulation of alternatives that need further collaborative networking among hitherto scattered voices of alterity. Almost in all parts of the globe, cultures and identities with innovative socio-economic and ecological practices are taking roots, anthropologists have the art and craft of recognizing these spots. They and open/ distance learning practitioners may now become partners and facilitate the local engagement of creating alternative ways of knowing, doing and learning. The assumption is, that along the way 'development' will not remain a pressing concern as it has so far been. Rather it has a chance to happen and as and how the local rural /tribal communities lead it to happen.

Many NGOs are engaged in the business of participatory development, in which people at grassroots take part in development process. There was a real possibility of NGOs feeling threatened by IGNOU's presence in their area of operation. Fortunately, they have come to see the common interest both IGNOU and the NGOs have in empowering the development workers so that they can carry out more effectively their work in rural areas. NGOs have always wanted to organize learning and training of their employees but have not been able to do so for reasons of paucity of time, funds and experience of organizing such programmes of study on a sustained basis. IGNOU, on its part, always wants to reach out to the unreached but has not for lack of its presence in rural areas. After the establishment of a Center for Extension Education in the university, it became possible for Sociology faculty

of the School of Social Sciences to propose the idea of preparing open learning packages in collaboration with development workers. In collaboration with another institute (Coady International Institute, Canada), the idea of networking with regional NGOs took roots and was pursued despite apprehensions cropping up when we flow against the stream. IGNOU, on its part, with its stated policy of reaching out to the disadvantaged provided support with the expectation of enhancing its capacity to take proactive role in participatory development.

The process of networking with national and regional NGOs took place with the above assumptions.

Open Space Dialogue Without an Agenda

With the premise of establishing dialogue with our potential learners, some of us at IGNOU approached selected Delhi-based NGOs with an all-India outreach for establishing a network of like-minded nodal and sub-nodal points. This led us to visit regional NGOs. We requested them to invite their partners located in towns /village. For a pilot exercise, two regions (Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan) were selected and meetings took place in each region with development workers. The IGNOU team participated in the meetings with a blank agenda sheet. This surprised the participants, who insisted that they needed to have an agenda to work on. Insisting that we had brought no agenda with us, and in order to initiate a dialogue, we told them about ourselves and explained that we were meeting them to find out what all of them did. We wanted to share their experiences so that we could also join them in the process of development that they were engaged in. In addition, we could also discuss the feasibility and viability of preparing in partnership with them an educational package for those development workers, who did not possess formal educational qualifications.

This opened up a whole series of discussions on *what* and *how* of the development workers' engagement. Many of them said that they seemed to know 'what' and 'how' of their work but never found time to reflect on its 'why' aspect. They said that they would appreciate a chance to pause and think about *what*, *how* and *why* of their activities. Further, the participants argued that new recruits to the NGOs required orientation and the old ones needed constant updating to keep their interest and commitment up. Mostly, after initial years, many development workers happened to become either complacent or indifferent or mechanical in their approach. It was concluded that yes, it may be a good idea to have some open learning material generated for the purpose of providing inputs, which will help development workers in their work more effectively. The agenda of the meeting was thus decided in the meeting itself and the participants decided the priorities for further discussions.

Further Dialogue Over Structuring the Learning Path

Subsequent discussions led to questions like who will use the open learning package and how it will be developed and delivered to the learners? After long debates among the participants, a profile was prepared. Several sessions were devoted to discussions on the contents of the learning package, duration of the learning period, format of the various components of the material, etc. This was followed by deliberations on how the learning basket will be prepared and, then how it will reach learners and what they will do with it. The following decisions were taken in the meeting:

- The regional NGOs and their local partners will pool together their resources to provide the material for the courses and they will provide both learners as well as facilitators.
- The facilitators will be persons with considerable experience in the development work, with fairly advanced skills of communication. They will be actively engaged with the learners during the six-month period of the learning programme.
- The learners will apply for admission to the course through their employers, who will, in turn, network with IGNOU Regional Centers for completing the administrative formalities of admission.

These discussions have been documented in the form of a photo album of charts.

The Nature of Alterity vis-a-vis Established Practice

The above process in IGNOU generally takes place in a number of Experts Committee Meetings, where IGNOU faculty and subject specialists (who are generally physically and mentally far removed from the learners) take decisions on programme structure, course syllabus, eligibility criteria, duration of the programme, medium of instruction, etc. In the case of SAVINI certificate programme, the regional meetings with select NGOs and their partners in towns and rural areas were the experts for the committee meetings. The participants evolved, during the sessions, the concept of SAVINI and worked out details on all the above-mentioned topics. Here the efforts were made to combine IGNOU's outreach capacity with participatory approach of those NGOs who were already practicing participatory development. In this experiment we constructed the course material transmission network through skills, insights, local knowledge and contacts of the NGOs. In this respect, the SAVINI experiment consciously deviated from the existing professional positions and power structures. It may however be mentioned that ironically, the participants, on the other hand, articulated their responses in the context of existing socio-economic relationships. They were trying to judge the value of IGNOU certification in terms of tangible gains of entry into the employment market. To this extent, one has to realize that even local knowledge is not static. This itself is constructed as a response to current paradigms of development.

Participatory Approach to Course Development and Delivery

All the partners in SAVINI project agreed that our ultimate goal was the participative, equitable and sustainable livelihood of the economically and socially marginalized and disadvantaged communities in the work areas of the select NGOs, who had considerable experience of working in the area of their operations. During the discussions it emerged that for reaching our goal we needed a new pedagogy, which was participatory. The anthropological training of 'participant observation' came to our aid. We found ourselves sitting with the NGO functionaries and working out the details, which turned out to be the pedagogy of participatory learning. Here, our assumption is that participatory development subsumes the use of resources contained in the knowledge and the experiences of local people (rural/ local communities in our context). As much as building on these resources aids changes in the existing systems of top-down planning, that much sense it would make to recognize local expertise with its multiple variants. Keeping in view their ultimate goal, the participants decided that one of our strategies was to develop a broad-based partnership, ranging from IGNOU faculty, a Canada-based training institute faculty, NGO-based

trainers, and development workers in the tribal/ village communities. The development workers had a crucial link in this network and, therefore, the main strategy was to prepare, in a participatory manner, educational packages to train development practitioners. The discussions among the partners brought out that the objectives of this plan of action were:

- (a) Capacity-building of development practitioners, working among the disadvantaged; and
- (b) Enhancing the capacity of IGNOU system to facilitate participatory development with enhanced productivity at reduced cost and efficient delivery of educational packages at lower maintenance costs (this may, in turn, change attitudes and responses of IGNOU policy makers).

Dialogue and Structure

More than a decade old experience at IGNOU has taught me that open education entails the learners deciding *what, where, when, who, why* and *how* of their learning. When such learners are at a distance from providers of learning materials, we add the term 'distance education'. With their distinct semantics, both open learning and distance education have provided me a perfect field of forces to experiment and build a model of participatory pedagogy. The issues of quality and relevance of education have guided my interest in the model. I have endeavored to achieve as much as possible the extent of

- Interaction i) between the learners and providers of learning materials, ii) among the learners themselves and iii) generally between learners and society.
- structuring learning paths by following the course of interaction during i, ii and iii above.

The dialogue image of education has always been a prominent part of education process. At present, however, in a typical class room-teaching environment, the teacher delivers the lecture and students listen and / or take notes. In most distance education situations, the learner is expected to develop the capacity to learn from pre-fabricated course materials. Both these situations provide little space for dialogue between the learners and the teachers. Many correspondence institutions photocopy excerpts from well-known text books/ articles on topics mentioned in the syllabus and mail them to their students. These institutions are cited as examples of utter lack of dialogue and structure.

IGNOU, on the other hand, follows the concept of course teams, introduced in the 1970s by the Open University of UK (see Mason and Goodenough 1981). IGNOU students receive a well-put together self instructional educational package, prepared in a conversational style. Sheer availability of good quality study material in one package has great value in those socio-cultural and economic environments where acquiring higher education is a path to securing employment and sustenance. But education process could certainly carry more value besides that of employment and sustenance.

In the developing countries, distance learners are both young students (who have not got seats in the regular college and universities), and adult learners (who enter educational institutions for a variety of reasons). Educational institutions in such countries as India (owing to uneven levels of availability of technology) are therefore compelled to operate in different modes and experiment with diverse patterns. Hence the SAVINI experiment is

only one of the many possible answers to the question. What are the parameters of our experiments and what theoretical approaches and concepts are to define our pedagogy? Answering this question through the SAVINI experiment and its participatory pedagogy has its plus and minus points.

Advantages/Disadvantages of the Model of Participatory Pedagogy

- i) Working with adult learners of SAVINI, admittedly had certain advantages. The goals of the learning programmes and the learners' professional work merged into one. This was the ideal situation in which the learners could really contribute to the programme design.
- ii) Though familiar with the name of IGNOU, the learners had very little idea of open and distance learning. Further they had among them unevenly spread experience of formal education. Luckily for this reason, they did not pose uncomfortable (for them as well as for us) questions about classes, lectures, examinations, results etc. Rather they looked positively at the fact that they could study and continue their day-to-day work.
- iii) The structure of the learning path as finalized by the participants was acceptable to them but they were also apprehensive about studying the print-based texts. They argued and made a substantive case for face-to-face interaction to share and learn. Some of them did raise the question: "What would be new in the programme for me to learn"? Some other participants provided the answers:
 - "other learners' experience will be *new* for you,"
 - "systematizing your knowledge will be *new* for you"
 - "reflecting on your learning and practice will be *new* for you"
 - "consciously applying your learning to your practice in concrete ways will be *new* for you".
- iv) Often it was difficult to accommodate each and every expectation of the learners. Many learners wanted extended contact programme of interactivity camps to be of longer duration. The employers (the NGOs) objected to this on the ground of loss of persondays for the organization's work.
- v) Some learners wanted a specified educational qualification for entry to the programme. Some others pointed out that under the existing conditions it is never a problem for an almost illiterate person to acquire a certificate for any educational level after paying bribe. They saw only the futility of keeping rules, which were regularly broken. They also argued the low-level competence of the "so-called degree holders" in terms of their ability to work in the field (in rural areas) **with** (and not for) rural /tribal communities. The learners were thus able to transcend the hierarchies obtaining in formal educational system.
- vi) Our Canada-based partner (CII) was apprehensive about the usefulness of the programme in the light of rather disparate levels of competencies among the learners, apart from other diversities of caste, class, religion, dialects, etc.

- vii) While dealing with development process, the SAVINI learners had special interest in building their capacity to follow participatory approach in their work. Practicing *participatory development* was their goal and developing *participatory learning* our goal. This helped us to immediately come together to set a common objective.
- viii) Based on the previous experience, we had no pretention of finding participation coming easily to us. We had to make conscious efforts. The technique of open space negotiations came to our aid as we sat face-to-face with the potential learners. (Later we found out that this was already in practice in several university campuses of the USA (see Brigham, 2000).
- ix) The concepts of dialogue, structuring of learning pathways and perceiving the learners as active agents helped us to weave our way through interstices of prevailing theories and methods of open and distance learning. An evaluation of the pilot phase of SAVINI revealed that in the structure of the programme there could be a better integration between print-based texts and skill based components of training during the interactivity camps. These were the aspects we addressed during the second cycle of running the programme and aversion of the course material resulted in
- Thorough revision of print-based text
 - More specific guidelines on the use of diary
 - More emphasis on skill-based training imparted by the experienced employees of the NGOs during the camps
 - Experiments of producing video programmes in which the SAVINI learners take the role of interviewers, and interviewees.
- x) The NGOs practising participatory development have their partners spread out in the rural/ tribal areas and through their network the SAVINI trained development practitioners can apply participatory development techniques. If educational institutions such as IGNOU take on the role of networking with NGOs in disseminating multi-media based education through open and distance learning, it would be seen as IGNOU's proactive role in enhancing the capacity of development practitioners and thus contribute to the development process of the country (for more discussion on this aspect see Jain, 2000).
- xi) Participation does cost: Active participation of learners in all aspects of planning developing and delivery of the programme has meant increased cost of launching the programme and sustaining it with its features intact. Interactivity camps in particular are the most expensive items of the programme. With increased role of NGOs in running the programme it would be possible to absorb the extra cost if the NGOs combine the SAVINI camps with their own events or if they are able to share with IGNOU both the per learner revenue and the expenses. These are some of the issues that can be discussed and resolved after negotiations among the stakeholders in the SAVINI experiment.

Conclusion

Our role as distance teachers in the whole process described above has been that of facilitators, who took the initiative of starting a dialogue with the intention of joining the groups in their activities, if welcomed. Structuring of the learning programme followed initial set of meetings. Negotiated decisions among the partners constructed the learning path. Autonomy of the learner groups became supreme, and providers of learning packages played the role of facilitators. Partners in the enterprise took active part in making the experiment take a concrete shape. As the NGOs partners in SAVINI experiment clearly revealed that the approach we adopted was found flexible, open and accommodating, and the participants felt no threat. In partnership, we could strengthen each other in terms of using our resources to mutual benefit. With this basic trust in our relationship, we started the experiment, which has now both vertically and horizontally expanded. Vertically, as per the demand of the learners, the educational package would be adding more courses and correspondingly, the learners would be enrolling for an advanced level of educational input, that is a diploma programme. The challenge is that any further addition has to be equally participatory, dialogic and open structured.

Horizontally, the certificate level programme is now available to learners in other regions of the Hindi speaking belt, besides Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. This open learning package can also be made available to learners in other regions after its adaptation in other regional languages. But before simply making the material available to such learners, it will be necessary to first establish a similar process of dialogue with local groups as it happened with the Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan-based learners in 1998-1999 and with the Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Uttaranchal learners in 1999-2000. More than the learning package, the process of interactivity between the partners is much more significant as it provides the bedrock of mutual trust and understanding for any development process to realise its objectives. Further, I find that anthropological training in the art and craft of listening/ observing and reflecting has aided me to appreciate the role of its development agenda. Our task has been to figure out how to adapt methods of anthropological research to open learning situations.

This was an opportunity for an anthropologist to learn afresh from community initiatives. Further, the local people themselves may share through documentation the strengths and weaknesses of particular community initiatives among larger audiences (other communities). Admittedly, one does not clearly know what more this process of interaction has in store for open and distance learning. Does it mean the end of teacher's role, as we perceive it today? Or, is it a totally new concept of learning about the 'self' and the 'other'? My anthropological training has helped me to discover and analyze the links between the nature of local participation and the hold of local power relations on it. The existing power structures, newly introduced bureaucratic measures and international donors often ally and manipulate the planning process and project it as 'people's agenda'. But rural/ tribal communities who are fast learning their lessons through the democratic process of national, state level and now local, village-level elections, seem to be prepared for paradigm shifts. Development practitioners appear to take the role of frontline agents of change. One cannot simply assume that participatory approach by itself would result in equitable and sustainable access of the marginalized and the poor to better means of livelihood and better

quality of life. We have yet to find evidence of participation being a provable methodology to achieve these.

However, through 'participant observation' both anthropologists and distance teachers can legitimately focus on *dialogue* and subsequent *structure* of learning paths and their implications for autonomy of learning groups. The SAVINI experiment is only one of the many steps in the direction of bringing learners in the center of the stage. The goal of centering the learners is connected with the larger goal of education, as a liberating force, to create a more equal and just world.

References

- Arnstein, S.R. (1969) A Ladder of Citizen Participation, *Journal of American Institute of Planners* 35: 19.
- Brigham, Steve (2000) Open Space: An Innovative Technique for Participatory Planning, *Planning for Higher Education*, 28: 35-41.
- Jain, Shobhita (2000) 'An Anthropologist's Experience of Working with Development Practitioners in Rural Areas', Presented at the *Annual Conference of the Association of Social anthropologists at SOAS, London, on Participating in Development: Approaches to Indigenous Knowledge*
- Mason, J. and Goodenough, S. (1981) Course Creation, in A Kaye and G. Rumble (eds) *Distance Teaching for Higher and Adult Education*, Croom Helm: London

Appendix 1

Special features of SAVINI

The key ingredients of the programme are

- (i) group interactivity and
- (ii) proactive initiatives or collaboration.

In other words, we are going beyond both traditional and information-based models of participation or dialogue. In the traditional model, the focus was on the teacher or the higher participant in the domain of discourse/ dialogue and role of the taught was passive and technology used was the blackboard/ TV/ radio. In information model of dialogue, the focus shifted from the higher participant to the taught or the lower participant in the process of dialogue, who was active and used the PC or computer technology. In SAVINI experiment, we are going further and making a case for knowledge and experience-based model, in which the focus is on group of learners. They are not only active but also adaptive and networking. In this horizontal relationship the anthropologist/ IGNOU faculty has the role of a facilitator and the learner is an active agent. The learner interacts in a wider group ('community' of SAVINI Learners) settings through consultation, dialogue and collaboration. In this knowledge and experience-based model approach, the boundaries between primary, secondary, technical, university and vocational education have given way to continuing life-long learning of all partners. In my understanding, anthropologists too have methodology of participatory process of course development through regional workshops in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan has provided us a basis for working out the eligibility criteria, duration, medium of instruction, course content and evaluation methods of the SAVINI certificate programme. Expansion of the programme to more areas of the Hindi-speaking belt of north India has meant further dialogue with new sets of learners, giving rise to more negotiations on nature of the learning package. This has resulted in increased degree of flexibility and openness in the programme structure to accommodate locality specific needs of the learners. This dynamic nature of course development process has confirmed that SAVINI experiment is not to end on a particular day. It has to carry on if it is truly participatory and if it does not steamroller all learner groups in one mould.

Course development from below is the main feature of SAVINI project, whereby all learners are the actual creators of the course material. This is made possible through the mechanism of ongoing development of course content. Fieldwork-based project reports are to be selected for addition to the course material as has been done in the second edition of SAVINI course material. In this way, the learners themselves would generate from below the bulk of the course material.

Operational aspects of programme implementation

Delivery of SAVINI educational package is through Programme Centers. In close association with IGNOU Region Centers and IGNOU faculty, our partners NGOs have set up SAVINI Programme Centers, according to the number and location of learners. On the basis of our experience during the pilot phase, we have confined the number of learners from 25 to 40 in each Programme Center. The learner group is drawn from the development workers employed by the selected NGOs in rural areas of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttaranchal and Uttar Pradesh.

The eligibility criteria for this programme include i) minimum age of 18, ii) fairly good command of Hindi (the local language) to read, write and carry out simple arithmetical calculations, and iii) six months' experience of development work during the employment with an NGO (practicing participatory development). All participating NGOs are to consciously try and encourage more women to enroll in SAVINI certificate programme.

Duration of the programme is minimum 6 months and maximum 2 years

Medium of Instruction is Hindi because during the pilot phase the programme is currently operational in Hindi speaking regions only.

The programme structure of SAVINI comprises five components, namely,

- i) The first component consists of the following **text-based three courses** of four credits each. (In IGNOU system, one credit is equal to thirty study hours.)
 - What is Development?
 - Working with Groups
 - Participatory Planning
- ii) The second component is the **field-based project** (the fourth course of four credits), to be carried out by each learner. (We found that in the first cycle of the programme, most SAVINI learners selected environment-related topics as their field project).
- iii) **Daily diary**, the third component of SAVINI, contains the record of the learner's continuous experience of project work. The record is to be maintained by each learner and this is why the diary has become the document of her or his assignment, to be submitted for assessment.
- iv) **Three interactive camps** are the fourth component of SAVINI. **The first interactive camp** provides orientation to the learners. Instead of sending the material by post (the usual mode for dispatching the IGNOU course material to its distant learners), in the case of SAVINI, the IGNOU faculty hands over the course material to learners. During a session of face-to-face discussions the faculty explains what the material comprises and how to use it and what is the expected outcome after going through the material and activities mentioned therein. The efforts here are to break the ice for those who have entered the course for the first time and have not been a part of the interactive group, which participated in initial and subsequent discussions. The efforts are made to build a relationship or partnership during the course of interaction of the next six months.

The second interactive camp is to gather information about each learner's progress in using the course material and maintaining the diary. It is the time for the facilitators, the IGNOU faculty, IGNOU Regional Center staff, NGO partners and the local programme facilitators to listen to our new partners and learn from their experiences. This is also the time to hand over any additional material that had been generated as a result of the experiences of the first camp, for example, the audio-video programme, prepared by the Electronic Media Production Center (EMPC) team, during the first interactivity camp. The EMPC team is providing the learners opportunities for creating their own audio-video inputs the SAVINI course material. This is a great

learning experience for SAVINI learners as well as for the EMPC team and the SAVINI project team of anthropologists/ sociologists.

- v) The fifth component of SAVINI comprises the **term-end examination** when each learner presents the report of the field-based project during the **third and the last camp** in the sixth month of the programme. The learners present their **report of the field work-based project**. They have the choice of presenting their reports in any medium, be it written, oral, songs, paintings, streets theatre, puppet show.

The evaluation methodology of SAVINI follows a participatory approach. The evaluation is by open public marking whereby fellow learners are part of the evaluation-panel. The panel includes one IGNOU faculty, and one NGO representative, besides the fellow learners.

We have now completed the **evaluation of the SAVINI experiment itself**, as it was implemented during its pilot run. We have received useful comments and suggestions from the learners. Mostly they asked for a thorough revision of the lay out of course material, with suggestions for giving more examples relating to children, urban slum living, and global imbalance of ecology. On language, the comments relate to tough words, acronyms without their full form, long sentences and essay style of writing. Further, the learners made strong plea to include all the case studies prepared by them. This implies that the learning package would now cover the themes related with development process at grassroots, as perceived by the learners themselves. Taking into account all the feedback from our learners and seeking active participation of all our partners we have now a **second edition of the three courses** of SAVINI certificate programme.

[**Dr. Shobita Jain** is Professor of Sociology, and Director of School of Social Sciences at Indira Gandhi National Open University, Contact address: SOSS, IGNOU, New Delhi-110068, India.]