

COMMUNICATION AT A DISTANCE

by

ABID KHAWAJA

This article explains the various communicative channels and techniques with special reference to the electronic media, as applied in the distance education system of the Allama Iqbal Open University.

The communication factor

Some abbreviation lover has expressed the concept of distance education in terms of three "Cs:" the clintele, the content and the communication. The quotation proves fairly true when viewed in the context of Allama Iqbal Open University. Here is an explanation.

The clintele of AIOU is different since the heterogeneous students comprise working people, job-seekers, womenfolk, semi-skilled workers engaged in technical and agricultural fields and even those who wish to acquire knowledge in some specific areas. The 'contents' (syllabus) appear to be different because the AIOU courses are mostly of applied nature. As regards 'communication' (the teaching-learning process), it is inherently different because there is no campus-based-system at the Open University. The teaching is therefore compensated by guidance and counselling, especially designed correspondence text and the electronic media.

Communication for whom?

The range and variety of AIOU courses is enormous. More than 350 courses have so far been offered. Intermediate and degree programmes are the most popular in terms of students enrolment. Another large area is the

*The writer is presently working as Deputy Director, Institute of Educational Technology, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad (Pakistan).

discipline of teachers' trainings, PTOC and PTC in particular. Many people are also interested in the skill-oriented functional non-credit courses.

The AIOU's offerings are spread over from the basic level functional and literacy courses to the degree and post-graduate level programmes. The total number of students actually enrolled during the semester of autumn '94 exceeds one hundred and ten thousand. Thus such is the target of AIOU communication.

The appropriate media

Since Chalk and talk doesn't have relevance in the system, the University follows non-contiguous (non-personal) methods for the delivery of information. Selection of communication channels are made on the following criteria:

- * Lower cost per head;
- * Greater teaching effectiveness; and
- * Increased accessibility to students.

Commonly used channels at AIOU include the print media in the form of correspondence text (books); the supporting mass media (radio, television and the small media of audio and video cassettes and projected aids for individualized and group learnings) and the inter-personal medium of tutorial meetings and workshops. The use of multi-media has proved multi-beneficial in the teaching learning process.

The courses are self contained type. This means the learning material contains more or less everything the students are expected to learn without much bothering to consult other sources.

(i) The written words

The text books of AIOU may rightly be termed as "talking books" due to the unique style of written stuff and presentation. Written words are not substitute to lectures or notes. However this material improves the

knowledge and skills of the students in definable behavioural terms enabling them to describe, analyze and apply what they have read. The active learning is ensured through interactive techniques like self-assessment questions.

The self-explanatory text addresses the students in easy-going way so as to understand spoken language accompanied by illustrations and graphics for clarifications.

The basic level functional and literacy courses of AIOU rely heavily on teaching through illustrations and audio recordings termed as "audio-vision".

(ii) **Tutorial sessions**

A face-to-face tutorial session is like a touch of 'realism' painted on the abstract canvas of distance education in wilderness. These meetings are important source to establish contacts between the students and their tutors. This, in turn, helps meet the educational and psychological needs of the isolated students by providing them guidance and counselling and monitor their pace of work.

(iii) **Electronic media and technology**

The Common motives behind using media channels like radio, television and other audio-visual aids are: to explain and to provide evidence to syllabus contents. As regards specific tasks of the media they may vary from course to course depending upon the services that each medium can offer.

While a book covers the theoretical and analytical aspects of the course, the electronic media serves to verify them with the help of its presentational characteristics. Television for instance is used for the visual interpretations of the written words.

Allama Iqbal Open University has so far produced more than two thousand radio programmes, over four

hundred television programmes, and a substantial number of non-broadcast audio-visual cassettes and slide-tape presentations in support of its various courses.

For science and technical subjects, television and video cassettes are used to show demonstrations to substitute difficult experiments and industrial visits, etc.

For social sciences, various media including audio and video cassettes are used to supplement and enrich the course concepts through talks, discussions, case-studies and showing applications of principles mentioned in the text in real life environment.

For basic level functional courses for rural population instead of text books the 'audio-vision' technique becomes the core teaching material. For courses like literacy the media of television and video cassettes can assume the role of direct teaching at mass level.

In language and literature learning the skills of accentuation, pronunciation, language formats and pleasure of poetry also can be dispensed through actual or dramatized versions in audio or video programmes.

Similarly disciplines like psychology, sociology, child growth, and education for disable, where behaviour study is involved, edited version of lengthy case-studies are recommended for follow-up discussions and analysis. Again, teacher training clusters such as PTOC, PTC and B.Ed, video is used to show model pedagogic techniques and micro teachings. And, for subjects like earth sciences and arachaeology the projected slides, showing still pictures alongwith the recorded narration, has proved fairly effective.

The 'Open Tech' is a new vocational training scheme for teaching various trades and skills to the younger population of the country. Informal and flexible use of television will help improve the technical competencies of the viewers who might already be engaged in various workshops and trades, such as repair of automobiles and

electrical appliances and income generating skills.

AIOU Television

Television meets the obvious needs of home-based students by giving them vicarious experience from the scientific, technical and social fields. With the advent of PTV-2 our transmission has extended further. Besides our primary audience, the general masses and students of formal system also gain benefits through spin-off effect.

A few advantages of television are as under:

- Being a glamorous medium it can captivate the audience who watch the information with interest.
- Real world with real people and real happenings are shown which help fill the gap of theory and practice. Television support to AIOU agricultural, technical and income generating courses enhances the authenticity of the text.
- Television helps understand information which is too complex for written or spoken explanation. Examples include: natural phenomenon, scientific explanation and skills.
- Lengthy and complex experiences are shortened by compact editing. Examples include: behaviours and processes.
- Slow motion and speeded up demonstrations are possible.

AIOU Radio

Radio in our country has the widest outreach. It can be moved everywhere at homes and workplaces. Electricity is not essential. Being a medium of voice radio is more personal and intimate as compared to written text when the aim is to persuade and give arguments. For courses on

social studies, education, language and literature radio is used for verbal explanation, interviews and drills. Students hear voices of people about whom they had been reading in the books in subjects like community health, sociology and rural development.

Radio livens the written words of text and creates 'sound pictures' in the listeners' minds. The case-studies and experiences presented through documentaries are interpreted by the students in a more dynamic way.

Revision and improvements of learning materials is a routine work at the University campus. While it takes time to incorporate changes in the text, radio which is a quick medium is used to deliver new information. The regular feature 'Jamia Nama' on radio helps the AIOU staff at campus to keep contacts with thousands of students all over the country.

Video and audio cassettes

Specially designed, the video and audio cassettes provide the students a greater access through the stop-start controls. The multiple viewing and listening of cassettes makes room for more dense and serious information as well as explanation of complex concepts. This is not possible through the transient nature of one-chance and one-way radio and television broadcast. Accurate and standardized a/v materials are supplied to individuals and small groups who can proceed with convenient pace by using their analytical skills. This format is practised in teaching of languages, teacher's training and functional education. Facilities are also provided in the network of AIOU study centres established all over the country.

Summary

Following are some general advantages of using media:

- Information reaches to the diversified and heterogeneous students rapidly and simultaneously.
- Effective where text or tutorials cannot explain sufficiently.
- Promotion of AIOU programmes to attract new clientele.
- Presentations become standardized and interesting.
- Bridges the gap between home-study and real-life.
- Media access private homes. This helps reduce the feelings of isolation among the students who can actually see and hear their teachers.
- Prominent persons, scholars and subject specialists address the students. This unique opportunity may not be possible even at formal educational institutions.

Media overcomes illiteracy. This quality has a special significance to the courses aimed at village level participants.

Though very innovative and effective the media is certainly not a panacea to various educational needs. Some of the limitations of using media experienced at AIOU include: accessibility problems faced by the students, reluctance to accept media as an educational source because of its entertainment-oriented nature, high utilization cost, inability of broadcasts to give serious education and trainings, lack of orientation to use media by the students, non-permanent nature of media messages due to which broadcast cannot be used as reference material.