Distance Education Insrtuctional Process Improvement Through Collegial Partnerships

By

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The 1995 workshop on the Teaching of English to Young Learners at Salzburg Seminar, Austria was based on collegiality of community representatives from 25 countries, Pakistan being one of them and represented by me. The collegiality concept was new, but it seemed to work wonders with 25 different individuals from different cultures and communities. Seeing the success of this aspect of collegiality, I took up my interest further in 1997 by looking at the collegiality from the point of view of school teachers in the school system of UK under two projects. This analysis gave the perspective of primary schools teachers. Since the feedback of the school teachers collegiality concept was very positive in the current paper (1999), the collegiality concept application for the improvement of Distance Education (DE) instructional process is taken.

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DE made its impact in the worlds' education system with the establishment of the first open university in UK called the *UK Open University*. This university became an international model for the world by providing educational opportunities to those who wished to study while working and at the same time were keen to enhance their education. DE instructional process, therefore, is very important for instruction to be effective in its truest sense.

As the name implies, the teaching learning takes place at a distance with the students enrolled from different places and backgrounds.

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The teaching learning process of DE places more challenges on the instructional designers, and implementers. Since the DE instruction is for those students, who mostly enrol on their own accord, they are motivated both intrinsically and extrinsically. The instruction in DE is not just students and teachers. It is a much more than formal educational institutions teaching learning process. The course design involves the input of course developers, media producers, designers, and teachers/tutors who are the actual implementers in the outreach system. The inputs in the instructional package are; therefore, based on the partnerships of course developers, media producers, editors, publishers. In order to improve the instructional process the need for collegial partnerships is utmost.

In DE instructional process the task of both the teacher and students is different as compared to the formal education institutions. In order to make the instructional process in the DE effective, we need to look at the aspects that need improvement. Firstly, how should distance education be conceived for the improvement of teaching. For the improvement of DE, we have to look at the instructional process catering to the needs of the learners. In DE the transactions between the teachers and learners is of a different nature. The transactions are in the form of dialogues, structure and learner autonomy (Moore1990, p.10-11). Dialogues is the interaction between the learner and the teacher in relation to the content of the of the subject matter under study, educational philosophy of the educators , personality of educators and learners, environmental factors and means of communication. Structure is the responsiveness of educational objectives, teaching methodologies and evaluations of the learners (Wedemeyer, 1971). Student autonomy depicts the extent to which learners exercise responsibility over their learning process. The crux of these transactions between teacher and student is that teaching and learning cannot be improved if the self-understanding of both the teacher and learner is not looked into. Dialogue and learner autonomy are, therefore, central to the quality of teaching and learning in DE.

Dialogue

The notion of dialogue in DE should not be *mistaken* with discussions which lead to dialects and often result in debate with the usual accomplishment of defeating the opposition. For our purposes dialogue should be looked at as:

...is the creative process in which entirely new ways of thinking and acting will emerge. Dialogue is a space of deep thinking where there is nothing to provide, where well worn ways of thinking, and being can let go of. In a dialogue there is nothing to be solved and nothing to be defended (Qualters, 1995: p.50).

The dialogue notion is constituted by two important philosophical aspects. As there is nothing to solve or defend, politeness and mutual trust is enhanced. This helps to arrive at new ways of thinking and acting. Secondly, as a creative process dialogue lends itself to an ever evolving process of deep thinking and understanding. Based on the two notions the dialogue can affect the teaching learning process at a distance as follows:

- In order to nurture mutual trust and politeness the teachers have to expand their self-awareness in such a way as to have more empathy and sensitivity to the student needs and concern.

- The teacher and the student at a distance establish a level of intimacy and comfort so as to understand each others perspectives and interests and thus commit to co-operative learning.

Learner Autonomy

Moore (1993: p.20) makes a claim for learners autonomy whereby they engage intellectually with the content and interact with the course developer in the study guides, interact with the feedback on in-text activities or assignments, and media. Since the learners interact in the DE process intelligently and responsibly, they give evidence of self-direction. Self-direction does go to include an element of critical reflection. Mezirow states that the learner autonomy thus acquired helps the learners to become aware of the assumptions which underlie the learning process, reflect on them and then question about their validity. This helps the learners to reform their assumptions into new ways of thinking and acting (Qualters 1995.p.49).

Critical reflection moreover demands both of the teachers and learners at a distance 'to take risks to challenge ideas and explore new conceptions and perspectives' (Anderson and Garrison, 1995: p. 197).

Therefore, the process of improving the quality teaching and learning at a distance should be subjected to the integration of 'information acquisition, critical reflection and critical discourse' (Anderson and Garrison, 1995: p.138-139). It is because of this that Anderson and Garrison aptly believe that:

> *Distance education models which are based upon one-way media such as educational television, computer managed instruction, or text books, cannot be expected to facilitate a community of inquiry and, thus , will be less likely to provide opportunity to think critically. While some introductory and well defined courses will emphasise the presentation of basic information...some opportunity must be provided to support critical discourse and the development of a community of inquiry (1995: p.197).*

A teaching learning environment which allows learners autonomy along with the opportunities for self-awareness both for the learner and the teacher surely helps in the attainment of excellence. Allowing learner autonomy in the instructional process is not so easy. It poses creative challenges. The learners of distance education are often in solitary situations but they are definitely self directed. Therefore, it becomes obligatory for the providers of distance education to consider the course design process in the light of research findings, so that learner autonomy is realised through each individual's self direction. Pascarella (1996: p.20) research holds that students demonstrate greater self-reflection, critical awareness and 'cognitive gains' if they have received well organised instruction and course materials. The same research also contends that critical learner autonomy is fostered when students are offered courses that challenge their beliefs and values. Pascerella's findings very well lead the way for the improvement of the distance education materials and calls for the course developers to consider introducing problem-based learning, in the course content. Problem based strategies introduce content in the context of real world problems of complex nature. White says (1996: p.76) students are expected to identify what they know, what they don't know and must learn to solve a problem.

In order to promote and sustain effectiveness and excellence in the instructional process of distance education institutions what is needed is much more than the learner-centred participatory approach based on dialogue and learner autonomy. The practitioners of DE need to improve it with collegial support and practice of all those involved.

There are many problems confronting the DE institutions. At times it is the isolation and independence, at other times it is no interaction and team-orientation (Kinsella, 1995: p110). This isolation and no interaction among the practitioners of DE may give them a feeling that to seek advice or share some concerns about course design may indicate lack of professional competence. Therefore, to do away with this solitary notion it is imperative that the DE institutions have structures for continuous collegial support for the facilitation and improvement of instruction.

It is here that the notion of collegiality in DE institution comes in. Collegiality refers to non-judgemental process of dialogue, open communication, and collaborative interaction between colleagues, in this case it means practitioners of DE. This dialogue can take place in the form of dyadic, tryadic, or team partnership, with an atmosphere of mutual trust, confidentiality and support. Institutions based on collegiality will help the colleagues to experiment, fail, reflect, solicit help, revise and return to classroom or course design /development process without any hesitation to try again (Kinsella: 1995: p 112-113). Collegiality also encourages self reflection as far as their own professional practice is concerned. Self-initiated reflection implies that colleagues accept the fact that their own practices in the DE delivery system and course design should be carefully reviewed and analysed then pursued for improving or changing their practices. Thus in this way collegiality allows for the challenging of ideas and improving shared practices between colleagues of the same and different Institutions. Colleagues bonded through collegiality are inner motivated persons who work to seek reward intrinsic to teaching regardless of the institutional policies. Likewise, collegiality does not discourage academic competition between colleagues and institutions. It helps teachers to recognise their strengths as well as draw on the talents of each other. According to Harper, 'juxtaposing each participants necessarily limited vision against a peer's distinct and contextually bound experience... thus allowing each to push the limits of his/her own meanings that might better promote critical reflection'(1996:p.262). It is because of this fact of promoting shared perceptions that the establishment of consultation of DE course design will make sense Peterson and Finkelstein (1981:p.21) claim that improved teaching and learning at institutions stems out of a general climate of collegiality.

Collegiality does not necessarily mean team orientation. A course team in the DE institutions comprising of academics, editors, multimedia

experts, who as a team have co-operated in the course development process yet the team's effort become dysfunctional when it is not properly proactively planned and co-ordinated. The lack of co-ordination can be attributed to the course developers who are responsible for the mistrust, confidentiality support and accountability. In this way the rationale which shapes the concept of teamwork seems to be out of line with collegiality. In order to look at the collegial partnership related to the improving the quality of instruction at a distance the three stages of DE courses needs to be looked in . The stages are pre-design planning, actual designing of the course, post design evaluation period. All these stages are very important from the point of view of DE. This consideration is supported by Robinson (1994) who calls the learning materials as the pivot on which the whole learning teaching enterprise revolves. In addition to her this viewpoint, there is her belief that the quality of course materials depends on the how effectively the delivery and the learner support system function, and how well they all integrate in the operational terms (Robinson: 1994: p.120).

Pre-design planning

During the pre-planning period relationship between course developers are planned in relation to the education goal. Based on this goal and the future vision of the course, course design, development, production and delivery process are conceived. In context of DE the course development will call for the inputs of academic authors, editors, reviewers, graphic designers, instructional designers, and other members as computer programmers, researchers, information technologists and publishers. Along with the above the quality of teaching learning at a distance cannot be targeted without being sensitive to the concerns of the students:

- The course developers may develop a profile of the perceived students by reflecting in the previous learner's experiences, consultation with previous colleagues, student services, meeting prospective learners and finding out their expectations from the course, mailing questionnaires to past and prospective learners and eliciting any other related information (Rowntree: 1994: p.43).
- Collegial research of content, mode of media, and learner evaluation procedure on the part of course developers and prospective learners together to find the students intended purpose and goal articulation.

- Negotiations between the course developers regarding time schedules , funds and costing , development plan, production and delivery of materials.

Designing the course

Collegiality demands that all participants involved collaboratively design bits of courses in groups. During this process they will have to consider the different steps in the course design, sequencing of the steps involved and evaluation of each others (Luckett: 1996; p.39). The considerations will result in agreed criteria for course design which is based on good course materials, encouraging critical reflection in the learners. As colleagues of the course development team, the course development is a continuous, recursive and ever evolving process of course design. The parameters of course design incorporate educational framework of thinking, student intake resources, curricular structure and aims. This is all in addition to the already agreed course outline, units contents, sequencing, continuity, pacing and methodology of each unit, frame-work of thinking, , assessment and feedback procedures (Luckett, 1994: p.40).

Collegial course designing as enumerated above lead participants to establish collegial trust and open communication to facilitate the improvement of the quality of course material.

Post-design course material

In the post design stage participants need to conduct their own course evaluations on the basis of collegial approach. Formative evaluation may be carried out so that course teams, colleagues in DE, can give feedback on teaching methods, and what other steps should be taken to improve teaching/learning so that their course materials may be modified. This needs to be an ongoing collaborative process of interaction and monitoring based on trust between course developers in relation to producing quality course materials. An unbiased summer time evaluation also needs to be pursued by administration and management in improving teaching learning at a distance so as to ensure quality teaching and learning.

Pursuing design and development through collegial partnerships will contribute towards improving the quality of learning and teaching. The collegial partnership in DE system does not confine to course developers,

course teams, colleagues in the DE institutions and students only but carries further to the other role players involved in the timely delivery of materials. No matter how well designed the course materials are but if they are not delivered on time then the quality gets affected. The failure of quality in the delivery system is attributed to:

> *A combination of poor record system, lack of specified time for despatching materials after receipt of registration information, lack of monitoring system and unclear designation of responsibility for checking performance… the late production of the materials, created by late hand over by writers …. infrequent communication and lack of co-ordination between the staff teaching the course.*
>
> *(Robinson, 1994: p. 186)*

Robinson thinks of 'quality assurance' as the prescribed activities that an organisation undertakes. The activities standards are specified and reached consistently for a product of service… (1994: p.128). For 'quality assurance' regarding design, development, production, and delivery of course materials collegial collaboration has not only to become visionary but also committed in DE institutions. However, the improvement of the DE instructional process does not rest on the collegiality of course developers, course designers, and media producers. What is needed is a broad programme to establish collegiality for the administrative management, support services, regional network as well. This need is most genuine as improvement in the instructional process is considered to be the norm of all the role players in the course development and design. The inadequacy of the management in the DE institutions is not seen to play any role in the improvement of the instructional process. Collegial partnerships of all role players be they from academics, information technology, management/administration is the need. Until this is perceived by all concerned little improvement in the instructional process through collegiality cannot be perceived.

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