

Co-operative Models of Course Development in Distance Education

*N.V. Narasimham**

Let us analyse how the changing philosophy of distance education had influenced the paradigm shifts from course team models to collaborative models of course development in distance education and identifies some basic collaborative approaches of course development followed by distance teaching institutions.

Changing Philosophy of Distance Education

Distance education system at territory level, started in the form of correspondence education, has undergone changes in its philosophy and approach. These changes may be characterised into four phases : (1) establishment phase, (2) expansion phase, (3) learner centred phase, and (4) technology and network phase.

Establishment phase : During the establishment phase the conventional universities established correspondence course institutions (CCIs) with the only objective of providing access to higher education at under graduate level. Student needs, in terms of study materials and guidance, were not paid much attention. Only syllabus was given to students at the time of registration, and annual examinations were conducted.

Expansion phase : During the expansion phase there was rapid growth in the number of universities offering distance teaching programmes and also expansion in the academic programmes offered. More and more programmes were offered at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, with relatively higher growth in the postgraduate level programmes, but not much focus on professional and vocational courses. The instruction was through a very sketchy cyclostyled print material supported by 5 to 10 days of contact programme. The needs of distance learners, though recognised at this stage, were not paid sufficient attention.

Learner centred phase : During the learner centred phase started with the establishment of open universities. Open entry, flexible study conditions, specially designed self-instructional multimedia learning material and study centres for student support were the highlights of this phase. Alongwith conventional courses, wide range of professional and vocational courses were also offered. Full pledged student support systems were established by the open universities with the support of intellectual and infrastructure resources of conventional institutions. Distance education system gained status and respect during this phase.

Technology and networking phase : Distance education system is now passing through the technolog and networking phase (Ram Takwale 1997, Rumble 1996, Indira Gandhi National Open University 1997). There is an increasing emphasis on the use of modern communication technologies to improve the learning flexibility, student interactivity, effectiveness of instruction, etc., to further strengthen the learner centred system of distance education. Use of modern communication technologies requires specialised skills as well as infrastructure which is beyond the reach of individual institutions. Hence, distance teaching institutions are compelled to form networks or become partners of a network. Compulsions of globalisation, economics of operations, sharing of resources and infrastructures, etc., are some of the main reasons where distance teaching institutions are compelled to become partners of one or several networks. As observed by Dhanarajan and Timmers (1992), now-a-days collaboration is one of the two front-ranking pre-occupations of distance education. In networks, each of the partner institutions is not only a consumer of the network, but also a producer, depending on its core competency. Therefore, each of them is a 'prosumer'. Thus, network arrangements ensure better involvement of participating institutions. These networks can be local or national or international, intended for designing or developing or delivering programmes, or sharing information.

These changes in the philosophy and approach of the distance teaching institutions have resulted in changes in their functioning in all aspects. This paper restricts itself to the paradigm shift in the course development approaches of the distance teaching institutions due to the changing philosophy at different phases.

Paradigm Shifts in Course Development Approaches

With the change in the philosophy of the distance education system during various phases, there are changes in approaches to course development during each of these phases. During the establishment and expansion phases there was no focus on course development. As a consequence, distance teaching institutions comprised of more administrators than academics, as course development was not an important activity. Subject experts from other institutions prepared some lessons in the style of normal text books, which were cyclostyled and sent to students.

Course development assumed significance with establishment of open universities during the learner centred phase, where distance teaching institutions adopted various innovative approaches to develop self instructional multi-media learning material at a reasonable cost. Subject experts, instructional designers, visual designers, linguistic editors, media producers, etc., were constituted as teams to prepare the learning materials. Depending on the composition of the teams and contractual arrangement between the

team members, course development approaches were classified into four broad groups : (1) course team model, (2) contract author and faculty model, (3) contract author and editor model, and (4) editorial advisor model (Smith 1980 and Narasimham 1995). The first two approaches were followed by the open universities while the later two were followed by the dual mode institutions. These four course team models of course development have certain limitations :

- Development of material is more expensive and time consuming (two to three years for developing a course).
- Heavy dependence on external experts who have neither time nor motivation. (Fleming 1982 : 134 and Rumble 1981 : 188).
- Duplication of efforts, as each institute is developing its own multimedia learning material.
- Uneconomical for small number of students, therefore, unsuitable for small institutions.
- In certain fields like technology (computers), taxation, public policy, etc., courses need frequent updating. The above approaches are not suitable when a quick revision is needed.

Due to increasing use of modern communication technologies during the current phase i.e., technology and network phase, distance teaching institutions are compelled to form networks to overcome the following shortcomings :

- Some communication technologies require capital intensive infrastructure, which is prohibitive for any single institution to establish.
- Application and utilisation of some modern technologies for educational purposes may require the support and services of specialised agencies.
- Sometimes an individual institution is not in a position to optimally utilise the technology.

The inherent limitations of the existing course team approaches to course development, and the compulsions of the modern communication technologies have given rise to co-operative and network based course development approaches during technology and network phase.

Collaborative Approaches of Course Development

As discussed earlier, distance education during the technology and network phase had various features that allowed curriculum sharing to take place. However, the nature

of collaboration in transferring and adopting learning materials is fundamentally affected by the nature of the co-operants and the specific context in which they operate. As a matter of fact, cooperation in course development is a very specific activity, not a general one. Dhanarajan and Timmers (1992) identified and explained ten key issues which determine the nature of collaboration between institutions in course development viz. curriculum, instructional design, assessment and examination, academic standards, delivery issues, technical considerations, legalities, copyright, basis of costing, and contractual obligations.

The paper attempt, to discuss five specific models of cooperative course development approaches adopted by distance teaching institutions. They can be studied as (1) Consortium model, (2) Partial consortium model, (3) Programme adoption model, (4) Course adoption model and (5) Institution and publisher model :

Consortium model : In this approach, two or more institutions jointly design and develop courses/programmes which are then used in their respective institutions independent of each other in terms of delivery and assessment. An example of this approach is the 'European MBA' programme being developed by the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (Narasimham 1997). EADTU (1987) constituted a programme committee consisting of the representatives of member institutions for the joint development of European MBA programme. Course outlines were jointly designed and each member institution had assumed responsibility for producing separately a specific course or parts thereof, as a main contractor. These main contractors produced the course material according to commonly designed specifications and their national course development procedures. After completion, the newly developed course material (master sets) were exchanged by main contractors at which specific adaptations were made, wherever required, by the member institutions.

Partial consortium model : In this approach, two or more institutions identify and design a common programme where some courses are common for all the institutions and the remaining are institution specific. All the common courses are designed and developed jointly, and exchanged among the member institutions. Development of institution specific courses is the responsibility of the concerned institution.

Examples of this model are the 'European Law' and 'What is Europe'? Programmes being developed by the EATDU. 'What is Europe?' Programme is made up of four free standing modules. For each of these modules, a core text is prepared in a number of community languages. Member institutions, whichever adopt this programme, develop their own study guides and other materials tailored to the requirements of their own students. Similarly, 'European Law' programme constitutes a number of mandatory courses and voluntary courses. The mandatory courses, which are the obligation (compulsory) part of the programme, are jointly developed and exchanged by the member institutions. Voluntary courses are developed by individual institutions. Students obtain an European Law degree on the mandatory courses and a given number of voluntary courses that can be selected by the students with regard to their specific interests and professional background.

Programme adoption model : In this approach, one institute independently designs a programme curriculum, develops materials, delivers and awards credits to students. Another institution adopts the same programme in total by paying some royalty, deliver it using its own delivery mechanisms and awards its own credits. An example of this model is the MBA programme offered by Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) which was adopted by State Open Universities in India. IGNOU launched its management programme in 1987 which was a runaway success. Two state level open universities adopted this programme in total and launched in their respective states.

Course adoption model : In this approach, an institution designs own curriculum, purchases course material from other institutes, adopts and delivers the same to its students. Thus, the institute takes complete responsibility for the curriculum design, delivery and assessment, while the other organisation whose material is purchased is no more than a supplier of course material.

The Open Learning Institute (OLI) of Hong Kong follows this model. To meet the curricular needs of its programmes, OLI purchases course materials from several distance teaching institutions all over the world. It supplements the externally bought material with study guides and other materials tailored to the requirements of its own programme and students.

Institution and Publisher model : This approach is similar to the course adoption model with the difference that the institution adopts a text book instead of purchasing material from another distance teaching institute. In this model, a distance teaching institution designs its own curriculum for a programme, identifies suitable text books available in the

market and enters into agreement with the respective publishers for the supply of the books. However, the total responsibility for curriculum, delivery and assessment lies with the institute only.

This model is adopted by the School of Computers and Information Technology (SOCIT) of IGNOU for its Master of Computer Applications (MCA) programme., SOCIT adopted popular text books for some of the courses. Expert committees which design the course curriculum also identify the suitable text books and suggests the school, which in turn, enters into a contract with the concerned publisher. Publisher supplies specified number of copies at the pre-determined price to the university Materials Distribution Division, which in turn delivers to the students.

Each of the above five models are adopted under different circumstances. Their adaptability to other situations require some deep analysis. In the opinion of Dhanarajan and Timmers (1992), there are significant problems in the cross-cultural and inter-institutional transfer of courseware. Contemporary institutions have a marvelous opportunity to define new methods for adapting existing material for use in the local context. As Calvert (1986) observes, 'barriers to course sharing are rooted in traditions of institutional insularity and individual academic autonomy. These are fortified by both lack of policies and mutually accepted conventions. Both political and administrative will is needed to overcome the difficulties.

Conclusions

Over a period of time, the philosophy of distance education at territory level has undergone changes in its philosophy and approach. These changes are characterised into four phases viz., establishment phase, expansion phase, learner centred phase, and technology and network phase. These changes in philosophy have resulted in changes in the functioning of the distance teaching institutions in all aspects. The course development approaches adopted by the institutions are different at different phases. During the establishment and expansion phases, there was no focus on course development. Course development assumed importance during the learner centred phase, where distance teaching institutions adopted various course team approaches to develop self-instructional multi media learning material. The inherent limitations of the course team approaches and the compulsions of the modern communication technologies have given rise to collaborative and network based course development approaches during the technology and network phase. Five models of collaborative course development approaches viz., consortium model, partial consortium model, programme adoption model, course adoption model and institution publisher model, are identified and discussed.