

Staff Training for Distance Education Systems: Some Issues

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Quality is one of the major concerns of Distance Education in India and other developing countries. However, to ensure quality certain prerequisites are to be met. Staff training is one of them. Despite the awareness about the need for staff training, little has been done to make it an imperative for system building. V.S. Prasad highlights the needs for staff training at different levels and also warns the dangers the system will face in the absence of appropriate training for distance education personnel.

1. THE RATIONALE FOR STAFF TRAINING

Distance Education has come to stay. The question now is how to make it effective and efficient? Hence, the question of quality becomes very relevant. Staff training is an important input in maintaining the quality of the system. The term "quality" is used in this paper to mean "fitness for purpose". Here "staff" refers to academic, administrative, technical/professional and all other categories of personnel working or intending to work on a full time or part-time basis in a distance education system. The term training is used to describe "the acquisition of knowledge and skills that people who work in a distance education system need" (COI, 1990, p. 8).

Training is an investment in the future. The adage "if you don't think of the future you will not have any future" is as true of institutions as it is of individuals. It is more true in the case of distance educators and distance education institutions. The training of staff should be considered an essential requirement of the distance education system because:

- distance education is a relatively new field and most of the staff who come from the formal system need orientation to distance education;
- training facilitates the updating of existing knowledge and acquisition of new knowledge, new skills and positive attitudes are required for the job;
- training is a tool for staff development which refers to harmonising the individual and institutional goals;
- training results in more competence to do the job, resulting in more job satisfaction to staff;
- training builds up the capabilities for taking higher responsibilities thus paving the way for career advancement;
- training results in greater commitment on the part of the staff;
- training staff contribute to the better performance of the institution resulting in a better image, credibility and viability of the system;
- training is an effective mechanism to meet the needs and challenges of the information age;

- staff training is necessary for the adoption of new technologies;
- staff training provides a frame of reference for work;
- staff training provides opportunities for self-development and learning from experience;
- staff training is necessary to enable the institution to face the challenges of change;
- staff training provides trainees an over-all view of the system and helps them in relating their role to the system;
- staff training results in better services to the students; and
- the training of policy makers, educators and public men lends social support to the system.

The above illustrative list of rationale for staff training shows that it is useful to the institution, its staff and students and justifies public expenditure on training. That is why staff training should be considered not only a desirable thing, but also an essential requirement for ensuring the quality of the distance education system. The rationale of training should also be used as a benchmark for assessing the effectiveness of training. Training is justified on the two philosophical assumptions that man is the measure of everything, and everything is in the process of becoming.

ISSUES

1. Is staff training only a desirable thing or also a necessary requirement?
2. How far is it possible to use the rationale as a benchmark for assessing the effectiveness of training programmes?

2. TRAINING NEEDS

Broadly, distance education staff can be categorised, in terms of the nature of their employment, as full-time and part-time staff. Many distance education institutions in India engage more part-time staff than full-time staff. The training needs of full-time staff are different from the needs of part-time staff. Full time staff need more

comprehensive, intensive and professional training and part-time staff need more activity — specific training. Among the full-time staff a distinction should also be made between those to whom it is a career and those who work for a specific period on a contract basis. The training needs of these two categories differ. Distance educators who wish to make it a career need more intensive and continuous training on the philosophy and practices of distance education.

The training needs of the staff at different levels also differ. From their place in the organisational structure broadly, the staff can be categorised into higher level staff, middle level staff and lower staff. The training needs of the higher level staff are more in the areas of society — distance education interface, inter-relationships of the different units of the system, the philosophy and policies of the system, the nature of group dynamics, the place and function of their unit/position in the system etc. The training needs of the middle and lower level staff are more in the areas of the nature of the distance education system and their specific roles and functions. The training programmes for higher level staff should focus more on generalities and group dynamics and for middle and lower level staff on specifics.

The training needs also should be assessed on the basis of the nature of their functions. Broadly, the staff of distance education institutions can be categorised as a) Administrative staff b) Academic staff c) Technical and Professional staff and d) Support staff. All the staff require a general understanding of distance education system and a specific training in their own jobs. The training should provide adequate and appropriate content in all the three domains (namely cognitive, psychomotor and affective) to build their competencies. All distance education institutions need staff with skills in areas like a) course planning (including media selection); b) development and production of materials in a variety of media; c) counselling and teaching at a distance; d) management and administration and e) research and evaluation. (COL 1990, p. 9)

The use of new technologies is crucial for the effective working of the distance education system. The new technologies may be used in the learning process and in the administration of the system. The staff should be trained to acquire the skills required in the use of technology like computers, electronic publishing etc., in the specific context of local situations.

Human relations and group dynamics constitute another important common area for focus in the training of distance educators. In view of the interdependent nature of the system, distance educators need a high degree of interpersonal skills and understanding of group dynamics. The course team approach in materials development, the academic-producers interface in the development of audio-visual materials, the academics — administration interface in the delivery of services need higher skills of interpersonal relations for the effective functioning of the system.

The training needs of trainers deserve special attention. The trainers should have a thorough understanding of the subject matter and the effective communication skills combined with a positive attitude to work and life. The training programme of the trainers should aim at building their competencies in all these areas.

In identifying the training needs of staff, the diversities in their competencies and aspirations should be taken into consideration. The need identification should be done with an active involvement of the staff concerned. A participatory approach makes the identification of needs more valid, and enhances the acceptability of the programme. Here one should also take into consideration the institutional perspective to training needs of its staff. The institutions may be more concerned with immediate job needs and individuals may be concerned more with their future needs. The institutional leadership must show imagination in integrating the individual employee-needs and institutional needs. Training is a continuous process, and staff of a distance teaching institution may need constant re-training to adapt themselves to the changing needs of the institution and the users of the system.

ISSUES

1. How can we make the staff realise the training needs and involve them in identifying their needs?
2. How must the training needs perspectives of individuals and institutions be integrated?
3. Can we determine the general and specific training content, and cognitive, psychomotor and affective domains of content in training of different categories of staff in distance education and provide a suitable mix of them?
4. Can we prioritise the training needs?

3. METHODS OF TRAINING

The Commonwealth of Learning's report on training (COL 1990, p. 9) concluded from the case studies that training programmes should

- be suited to the needs of the institution;
- be available to all categories of staff;
- be suited to the experience of staff;
- provide a sequence of training opportunities;
- offer scope for career advancement; and
- employ a variety of strategies.

A combination of distance mode methods and face-to-face mode methods should be adopted in training the staff. Multi-media should be used for training purposes.

Workshops, orientation programmes, symposia, conferences, brainstorming sessions, and briefings are widely used for training purposes. Training manuals, journals, audiovisual demonstration sessions, Broadcast media can also be used for training. Efforts are also made to use interactive technologies like teleconferencing, radio-talk

back, and computer assisted learning for training purposes.

Koul (1993) rightly observes that "Workshops are one of the major means of imparting training in the various areas of distance education at the present stage, and they will remain significant for quite some time to come". There is a need to make these Workshops more purposeful by adopting a project approach. The project approach focuses on designing a scheme of the activities with clarity of goals, means and results. The project approach for training Workshops have three phases i.e. Pre-Workshop activities, Workshop activities and Post-workshop activities as detailed below:

1. Pre-workshop Activities
 - a) Self-Assessment of Needs
 - b) Identification of problems
 - c) Preparation of a project for discussion in the Workshop
 - d) Study of background materials
2. Workshop Activities
 - a) Identification of issues
 - b) Acquiring of skills and knowledge
 - c) Working on a project
3. Post-Workshop Activities
 - a) Completion of Assignments
 - b) Application of knowledge and skills
 - c) Preparation of Report on the application of knowledge/skills

The three-phase approach to Workshops described above is likely to result in better returns for the investment made in training (Prasad 1993).

Lewis strongly advocates the competence based approach for staff development (Lewis 1992). He is very critical of the British Open University's top-down staff development approach and advocates a grassroots and participative approach to build the competencies of staff. He hopes that competencies as a framework would meet the criteria of continuity, individual involvement and flexibility. His observations are equally relevant to the Indian situation. Experience sharing by the part-time staff at the study centres has been observed to have a dual purpose. It reassures the staff about the practices they engage in, and suggests directions for improvement. Discussion of common areas of difficulty has the added advantage of reducing the isolation of the distance education practitioner.

The training methods and content should take into account the institutional resources, the individual needs and resources and the nature of students. The cultural content and the characteristics of students and their needs should also get due attention in designing the training programmes for the staff.

ISSUES

1. The training programmes are mostly organised through the face-to-face mode. Is it not a reflection on the efficacy of the distance mode for education?

2. Can we think of any indigenous methods of training?
3. How can we make the participatory method of training a reality?
4. How can methods and content be designed to suit the diverse needs of the staff?
5. Can we use praxis, meeting of ideas and practices, as a training method?
6. Can training be internalised as a value informing day to day work?

4. ADMINISTRATIVE ARRANGEMENTS FOR TRAINING

Appropriate organisational structures for training should be created in the distance education institutions to take responsibility for organising and facilitating the training activities. In this context, it is relevant to examine the desirability of a centralised or a decentralised model for the organisational arrangements for training. The centralised model, which means creation of a central training unit in the institution, has the advantages of clarity of purpose, specialisation and continuous attention. But it suffers from some disadvantages like lack of field knowledge, isolation from operational units etc. The decentralised model puts the responsibility for training on operational units. This has an advantage of active involvement of functional units in the training programmes. But it suffers from too much of diffused activity and lack of over view of the processes and institutional direction. A more programmatic approach would be the creation a centralised training unit with core staff acting as a catalyst, undertaking activities in collaboration with the operational units. This combines the advantages of both the centralised and decentralised models. The nature of the central unit should depend on the nature of the larger institution. These training units must be equipped with modern tools for facilitating the training activities.

In the training activities, collaboration and networking arrangements among the different institutions is very essential. In view of the limited human and material resources available in this area, collaboration among distance education institutions helps in the optimum utilisation of resources. The national and international agencies like Staff Training and Research Institute in Distance Education (STRIDE) New Delhi, India and Commonwealth of Learning (COL) Vancouver, Canada can help the local training units to:

- develop training materials through the use of multimedia;
- organise the training of trainers;
- conduct the research on training in distance education; and
- develop the criteria and the mechanism for the evaluation and validation of training programmes (COL 1990, p. 77).

ISSUES

1. Should there be a centralised or a decentralised organisation structure for training?
2. How do we ensure collaboration/net-working in organising training activities?
3. In the context of participatory, flexible and continuous nature of training activities, what is the role of the national and international bodies in this field?

5. EVALUATION OF TRAINING PROGRAMMES

Assessing the value of training impact is often not visible immediately. It is mostly intangible and subtle. The feedback of participants is one of the mechanisms for evaluating the programmes. It need not necessarily be relied upon completely. The training impact on the performance is very difficult to identify and measure. Further, performance is a function of multi-variables. Training is one such variable and many a time it is a dependent variable. Judging the value of a dependent variable is fraught with many imponderables. This is not to say that it is impossible to evaluate training programmes. Probably training programmes may have to be evaluated and validated by their processes rather than by results. "Let us build a good programme first, and then we will worry about evaluation" seems quite logical.

The process of training must be made a very systematic and rational exercise. The systems approach emphasising the interconnectedness of different elements of the training process as shown below makes the process logical and amenable to formative evaluation.

STAFF TRAINING FLOW CHART



ISSUES

1. Is it possible to measure the impact of training?

2. Who should evaluate the training programmes?

6. ESSENTIALS FOR EFFECTIVE STAFF TRAINING SYSTEM

Many writers have identified problems in training the staff of distance education institutions (COL 1990, p. 77). Some of the essential requirements for an effective training system are:

- institutional commitment;
- commitment on the part of the staff for professional development;
- adequate material resources for the purpose;
- competent trainers;
- appropriate organisational situation to give effect to knowledge and skills acquired through training;
- development of suitable methods of training based on research into the effectiveness of learning strategies; and
- integration of training policies and practices with the institutional development goals and practices.

7. SUMMING UP

Looking from a systems perspective, effectiveness of staff training depends on the organisational and social environment. The organisational culture must be conducive to the utilisation of competencies of staff. The reward system in the institution must be based on the rational criteria of performance. In an Indian organisational culture where sycophancy, mediocrity and duplicity are ruling the roost (Haragopal and Prasad 1990), cynicism in some quarters on the utility of training is understandable. This has led many people to consider training a luxury and an academic holiday. But the training which may be a victim of negative organisational culture has the potential to transform it. Here, the commitment on the part of leadership and staff of distance education institutions can play a critical role in making training an important tool to ensure the quality of the distance education system. Let me end with a word of caution: Staff Training, though an essential requirement, is not a sufficient condition for promoting quality in distance education.

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