

Distance Learning Materials of the Developing Countries: How About Their Quality?

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The developing countries need to depend increasingly on the distance education system desperately to counter the problems of lack of resources, limited expertise and larger commitments. The magnitude of these problems render consideration of professionalism and quality control matters of luxury that the developing countries can ill-afford — at least until the problems become manageable. Alas, the system never gets good enough to counter its opponent successfully. This paper delves into some of the theoretical and practical aspects of this paradox.

Quality control is a concept which has found its way from the parlance of industry to that of education after the emergence of the DE system. The reasons you could probably guess at, but the significance is a point we would like to stress upon. Every system feeds on excellence for its growth and the DE system is indeed no exception. Unfortunately, the correspondence and distance education institutes in the developing countries in many cases remain to a large extent second rate institutions — both in terms of the teacher and the taught. As this article points out, it can hardly then turn out to be a viable alternative in the scenario of education. An honest appraisal of what has gone wrong, what needs to be corrected and how that may be done is needed now. Here are a few pointers in that direction.

For want of a nail the shoe was lost,
For want of a shoe the horse was lost,
For want of a horse the rider was lost,
For want of a rider the battle was lost,
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost,
And all for the want of a horse-shoe nail!

— A popular nursery rhyme.

INTRODUCTION

If the people of the poorer countries lost their kingdoms in the past for want of a 'horse-shoe nail' the same history may repeat itself more cruelly this time for want of quality control in their economic as well as educational operations. The seductive dream of a global economy and a new world order may bring in some temporary solace to the crises ridden 'advanced' countries suffering from the indigestion of recession, but it has already started to show its 'human' face in the mass starvation deaths of the poorer countries. What is true of politics and economy is also true of educational systems. For Distance Education in the developing countries, quality control is the 'horse-shoe nail' the neglect of which will cost quite a few educational kingdoms which are already over-dependent on the alien models of the advanced countries.

The idea of imparting high quality education to millions of learners at low cost through distance mode has caught on very well with political leaders and policy makers perhaps because of the common belief that distance education would reduce the financial burden of the government and the student unrest in the campuses. At present there are about 200 distance teaching institutions

of all varieties in the developing countries with a few million students. However, it is doubtful whether the potential of distance education has been rightly understood and practised in the poorer countries. The general tendency in the distance teaching institutions in the developing countries is to start with course development (e.g. India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh) or borrow courses from a developed country (e.g. Kenya and many other African countries), and launch academic programmes. Newly established distance teaching institutions spend very little time for planning, curriculum development, monitoring and evaluation mainly because they operate with limited time schedules and resources. Further, when the educational institutions in the poorer countries choose their models from the developed countries they tend to lose sight of their specific and peculiar realities concerning academic traditions, educational standards, human and material resources, and the problem related to language as medium of instruction. Poor institutional planning, lack of proper recruitment procedures, inadequate or absence of staff training, poor working conditions and weak management systems make it extremely difficult for the poorer countries to realize their goal of offering educational programmes of acceptable quality on mass scales at relatively low costs.

RATIONALE FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION IN THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Having said that, one should also appreciate the urge and the need of developing countries to go ahead with their distance education programmes. If lack of resources were

to cause serious problems in implementing educational programmes, the developing countries have chosen distance education as a strategy precisely because of the limited resources available to them. In an effort to 'catch up' with the developed countries, the developing nations strive to find alternative strategies to achieve their educational goals in a short span of time. This is one reason for the proliferation of distance education institutions with uneven standards.

More than the *number* of institutions and students, it is the quality of teaching-learning that decides the credibility of distance education programmes everywhere. Course development plays a keyrole here. Since there is little expertise and experience in the developing countries, they usually look up to the advanced countries for help and advice. Although there are different models of course development in the developed countries, the British Open University's course team model has been the most influential one so far among the developing nations that use English as the medium of instruction at various levels.

QUALITY: A MATTER OF CONCERN

Notwithstanding the various forms of assistance from the advanced countries, the developing nations seem to have benefited very little in real terms. Analysing the Distance Education (ICDE) literature since 1985, and the theory and practice in Papua New Guinea, Malaysia and Thailand, Arger (1990) raises the question of the promises made by Distance Education and the reality in the 'Third World' countries. He argues that though the promise is to improve access, equity and quality, the answer to the question whether the promise is realised is a 'qualified no'! Papua New Guinea, Malaysia and Thailand, it is significant to note, are three of those very few developing countries to have tried and made appreciable progress in their own ways while deviating from the models of the advanced countries. The point, however, is that even these countries have not made the kind of contribution that can match the standards of the advanced countries. India, for example, has been offering correspondence/distance education programmes for three decades but until recent years, there was no serious thought given to its quality and credibility either in academic circles or elsewhere (Mulay, 1986). In January 1991 there were altogether 54 distance teaching institutions of various types in India—Correspondence/Distance Education Directorates, State Open Universities and a National Open University, and 11% of the learners of Higher education had registered in these institutions. Statistically speaking it is an impressive expansion but in reality this 'proliferation has no reference to quality' (Reddy, 1988). Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) was established in 1985 with a view to bringing in a qualitative change in the practice of distance education in the extremely complex situations prevalent in India. The impact of the operations and activities of IGNOU is yet to be evaluated. Among the many African countries offering distance education,

Zambia has achieved a degree of success but the problems, particularly in the area of course development and student services, 'reduce the quality' of its distance learning programmes (Mulenga, 1987). In Kenya, private, mainly British, correspondence colleges were the agencies to offer distance education for many years. In the 1980s the government of Kenya set up its own institutions to do the job. However, lack of material resources such as electricity, postal services, equipment, funds, etc., lack of qualified staff, the poor mastery of English which is the medium of instruction and the slow administrative handling on the whole, hamper the application of distance education in Kenya (Holmberg, 1985). The experience of other developing countries may not be very different from what we have seen above.

QUALITY AND QUALITY CONTROL

Quality of courses offered by the distance teaching institutions of the developing world assumes significance in the context of their lack of resources, limited expertise and larger commitments. Quality, in industrial terms, is defined as 'error-free, totally reliable products or services', and customers measure the quality of a product by 'how well it fulfils their expectations at a given price' (Holt, 1990). It refers to a product's fitness for a purpose according to a set of required standards (Guri, 1987). Quality control, says Guri, is primarily an action which adjusts operations to predetermined standards. Total quality control, according to Holt, implies a total involvement by everyone in the organisation to provide customers with reliable products and services that fulfil their needs. In the context of distance education, the 'organisation' is the university/institution, the 'customers' are the students, the 'products' are the courses and the 'services' are the student support services. The total involvement of all the functionaries of the institutions, of course, is an issue which has many thorny sides and therefore let us assume that we are talking about institutions where the involvement of people is there upto the expected level.

QUALITY OF DISTANCE-LEARNING MATERIALS: INDIA

It is difficult to say anything definite about the quality of distance-learning materials of all developing countries, especially when there are not many evaluative studies available on this count. Considering the major focus on the 'models' of the advanced countries, it can be argued that the established distance education institutions of the advanced countries have little use for the materials developed by poorer countries. On the contrary the poorer countries continue to depend on the rich countries, a dependency which is detrimental to the disadvantaged in the long run. However, this unfavourable dependency shall continue in the poorer countries till they wake up to improve the quality of their operations which need not be based on expensive models.

Typically, a distance teaching institution in a developing country starts its course development by appointing a few academics with very little or no experience in writing self-instructional materials. An Expert Committee of senior academics who themselves do not usually write the materials decides the syllabus for the discipline concerned. Depending on the schedules and availability of time, either the internal staff or the external course writers write the first drafts of the units/lessons, and a senior academic certifies for the quality of the materials. When the materials are printed, they are mailed to the students who generally study without much institutional support. This is the general scenario in the Correspondence/Distance Education Departments/Directorates in India with a few exceptions which offer short contact programmes for the students. After the establishment of IGNOU, there is some rethinking on the part of these Departments/Directorates as well as the four State Open Universities with regard to course development and student support services. It must be admitted, however, the effectiveness and the quality of IGNOU courses are yet to be evaluated.

In the absence of formal, rigorous evaluative studies one has to rely on one's own impressionist assessment about the quality of the courses. The following observations about the quality of the distance-learning courses are based on my analysis of five correspondence lessons of five different Distance Education Departments located in conventional universities in India and to avoid futile controversies, I do not name them. The lessons in general do not have the self-instructional features; their contents are neither paced, nor presented in a logical order; the authors of the lessons have shown little interest in enriching the content or updating the data. One lesson for example is meant for students at the Masters level, and discusses the economic development of India till the present time. But the information used is quite outdated. For example, to illustrate the gap between the advanced countries and the developing countries, the author relies on figures pertaining to 1949! Most other facts and figures pertain to 1950s and the 'latest' data stop with 1964. And the unit goes to the students studying in 1991-92! To top it all, the lesson is written in one of the major Indian languages. There are errors and inconsistencies in writing the names of authors and technical terms. While presenting the content, there is no consistency in approach and there is no evidence of having sought the opinions of experts in the discipline concerned. When questions are asked at the end of the lesson, the scope of the answers is not mentioned, nor is there any feedback; and the books suggested for further reading do not give any information about the publisher, year of publication, price, etc. Another lesson meant for M. Phil. students of Economics is about Lenin's theory of imperialism. There is hardly any discussion, let alone a critique! There is no attempt to explain the terms and concepts used and the lesson as a whole is no more than a bad summary of Lenin's book *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Similar was my experience with the other three lessons (one on

literature, one on computers and one on Library Science) developed by three different departments of correspondence education of well known universities. The point being made here is that even established institutions offering courses through distance mode for decades to thousands of students in the developing countries do not ensure the quality of their materials. One can imagine the state of affairs in low profile institutions/universities. To improve the situation, the idea of establishing open universities has been given more serious attention. In India, for example, the IGNOU was established with similar intentions. IGNOU has a two-fold responsibility: i) to function as a university and ii) to coordinate and determine standards of distance education in the country. Recently a high power body—the Distance Education Council—was set up in the University primarily to determine the standards of distance teaching programmes including the quality of learning materials in India. IGNOU's experience in course development should enable us to have a few more insights into the complex problems of course development in the developing countries.

IGNOU EXPERIENCE *

When IGNOU was established in 1985, there was paucity of indigenous expertise and experience in offering fully-fledged multimedia distance education programmes in India. Since course development was one of the priorities for the University, it was felt that academics should get some training in developing self-instructional materials. Accordingly IGNOU organised a series of workshops on course development with the assistance from UNESCO and ODA. Table 1 gives some important details of the workshops conducted so far.

The above mentioned workshops pertain to course development and also the related areas like assessment and evaluation. Of the workshops on course development as such, only the first one held in 1986 was more comprehensive and intensive both in terms of content and duration. The contents of the other workshops on the same theme were very preliminary and somewhat superficial to the extent that the participants got a limited exposure to the general principles of DE and SIM (Self-instructional Materials) and the participants were not really required to produce or develop any SIM at the end of the session, whereas in the case of the first workshop a document was produced with contribution from all the participants. Moreover, the content of the successive workshops held since 1987 hardly changed because they were organised for orienting the newly recruited academics to the DE system. As there were no follow up training programmes for the academics in course development, they had to contend with the limited exposure in this area. When the university set deadlines for developing courses, there was hardly any time left for introspection, criticism and modification of strategies of course development. As a result, a kind of mechanistic approach has been followed till today, although suggestions have been made by some

academics to review the current practice and think of alternative approaches to course design and development. However, the loss in this kind of exercise is that an opportunity to develop genuinely good quality materials has been missed. Certain crucial factors or phases that ensure the quality of the learning materials were bypassed because of time constraints and other exigencies. Research

iii) Remain satisfied with the materials originally written in their own languages.

Whichever option they choose, the experience may not be fully rewarding.

In option i) the reality is that most students are not competent to use English. Those students who have a

Table 1 Workshops on Course Development organised at IGNOU, 1986-1990

Sl. No.	Date/ Duration	Title of the Workshop	Resource person(s) from	Number of participants from	
				IGNOU	Other Institutions
1.	Oct 20-28, 1986	Development of Distance Education Instructional Material	STOU, Thailand	3	17
2.	Mar 23-27, 1987	Self-Instructional Materials	IEC, England UK	25	
3.	Oct 10 - Nov 03, 1987	Development of Materials for Distance Education	IEC, England	23	
4.	April 18 - 30, 1988	DE and Course Preparation	IEC, England UK	10	
5.	Nov 14-19, 1988	Course Preparation	IEC, England UK	45	
6.	Jan 9-19, 1989	Development of Training Packages	IGNOU, India	6	24
7.	Jan 23-Feb 15, 1989	Training Trainers	IGNOU, India & IEC, England, UK	11	
8.	April 17-May 11, 1989	Self-Instructional Materials	IEC, England, UK & IGNOU, India	29	
9.	Dec. 1990	Course-Development	IGNOU, India & C.O.L.	14	7

and evaluation that should have begun simultaneously along with the course development are yet to begin in a formal way. Due to all these, IGNOU learning materials, though content wise much better than the materials developed by other DT institutions in India, are yet to be evaluated through rigorous research to adjudge their effectiveness and userfriendliness.

LANGUAGE, DISTANCE EDUCATION AND THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

It is of course a matter of great concern where distance learning materials are available only in English, a language which is not the mother tongue of most learners. However, the real impediment for the distance learners here is their inadequate command of the language through which they are expected to learn. Related issues in this context are those of translations and production of materials in the languages of the learners. Distance learners in the developing world have the following hard options.

- i) Learn through a language (e.g. English) which is not their mother tongue
- ii) Struggle through the contrived translations of study materials

reasonable command of the language constitute a tiny elite group who in any case grab the opportunities in all the organisations. Here, the question is not one of English as a language as such, but how it is taught and to whom. Except the children of the elite, almost the entire student population of the rural areas and a large number of working class children in the urban centres receive a kind of instruction in languages — both in the mother tongue and English — which does not really prepare them to tackle problems related to the medium of instruction in self-learning. If the materials available in English are of high standards, the linguistic competence of most students is low, and therefore no effective learning takes place.

As an alternative if we could suggest translation of materials into the mother tongues of the learners (i.e. option ii), there are a number of practical problems which do not accept easy solutions. A cursory glance at the available translations in Indian languages, for example would show that the problem, instead of getting solved, gets confounded. The translations are contrived, the expressions clumsy and the concepts either mixed up or wrongly presented. In the absence of native linguistic traditions to absorb the latest developments in all the branches of modern knowledge and express them in a

suitable idiom of the language, literal, dictionary translations will not help much. Rather than helping the students, bad translations may create in them a distaste for the disciplines as such. Good translations are possible, provided there is a conscious process operating at all levels of the intellectual life of a nation. Where interests are divided, there is no scope for a common approach, at least in the present, and there is no reason to believe that such process is operating.

Regarding option iii) that is, developing learning materials originally in the mother tongues of the learners, we are faced with problems similar to that of the second option. The examples of Japan, Russia and a few other countries are often cited to support the arguments that mother tongues alone should be the medium of instruction at all levels of education. Such arguments suffer from lack of historical understanding about nations, and languages used as mediums of instruction. It is a simple truth that nations which had the historical good fortune to avoid the misfortune of colonial rule, have also succeeded in developing their native languages along with the development of native industry and science, and the vocabulary, idiom and the conventions of their own languages to the extent that they are used as mediums of instruction very effectively. The colonised, on the contrary, had to bear the great loss of allowing their rich languages to stagnate — some of them are very rich in literature and tradition — since they had the compulsion to study the modern disciplines through the language of the coloniser.

Having said that, one should remember that at the present historical juncture we cannot take a sentimental or romantic view about a language as a medium of instruction. For example, many of the Indian languages are very rich in their linguistic and literary traditions but because of two centuries of colonial rule, they could not develop in a natural way their vocabulary and conventions to express the concepts and ideas that have emerged through

European languages, especially English. For the same reason English is being used as the medium of instruction upto the higher education level in India. For obvious reasons English shall continue to play the key role for quite some time even if efforts are made to replace it in a rational way with Indian languages! The point, however, is that English is not taught to all students in the same way. Once again those who learn English reasonably well are those members of the elite which is a tiny minority of the society. In such a situation the majority of the students cannot hope to get education of a comparable standard either through their mother tongue or through English. Altbach (1987) and Creed and Koul (1991) have identified some of the problems caused by the medium of instruction in the developing countries, and have also discussed at some length the complexities involved in switching over from English to mother tongue as a medium of instruction in non-English speaking nations. A definite solution to the problem, however, is yet to be arrived at. This being the plain reality, the course developers in countries like India must also give serious thought to the issue of medium of instruction when they write courses.

To conclude, the developing countries should first ensure the quality of their distance education programmes. Expansion without any reference to quality or standards will be counter productive and will eventually bring disrepute to the system. Good planning, sound policies of recruitment, appropriate staff training, the right kind of curriculum and strict monitoring and evaluation would bring success to the poorer countries, inspite of their limited resources. Learning from the experience of the advanced countries is alright, but distance education must take its roots in the native soil of developing countries and adapt itself to the peculiarities of these nations. Proper attention to quality of courses and other curricular issues will boost the morale of these countries in their practice of distance education.

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