

Are Contact Sessions Necessary in Distance Education? A Feedback to IGNOU

M.D. USHADEVI

Assistant Professor, Education Unit, Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore 560 072, India

Face-to-face contact sessions with Distance Learners is accepted as a necessary strategy to overcome their social as well as the academic alienation. As an improvement upon the current practice of contact sessions organised by most distance teaching institutions in India, IGNOU has gone ahead with its regular contact sessions for students at its Study Centers. Ushadevi raises a few questions about the logistics of organising the contact sessions, although she does agree with the principle of face-to-face contact with distance learners. Are there some answers?

INTRODUCTION

The Indira Gandhi National Open University has employed several innovative strategies to impart instruction like the self-instructional print materials (SIM) and the non-print media like the Audio, Video, Radio and Television. A well-developed student support system (SSS) also exists to cater to the varied needs of the learners who come from a variety of backgrounds. It is in this context SSS and the contact sessions form an integral component. The contact sessions in IGNOU are given a different nomenclature, 'counselling sessions' (C.S) which presupposes counselling services to distance learners to overcome all kinds of learning barriers. These counselling sessions are conducted for shorter durations periodically at the Study Centres with the help of an 'Academic Counsellor', who is trained for the purpose. This paper attempts to make a critical assessment of the contact programmes organised by IGNOU.

THE NEED FOR CONTACT SESSION IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

In distance education, most learning is self-directed. For most part of the time, the learners are on their own, choosing their own courses and studying them on their own either in their homes or at their work place with the help of printed course materials. If this self-directed learning is not adequately guided and monitored through appropriate 'human interventions' then the chances of distance learners drifting away are higher. It is in this context that the issue of contact sessions assumes vital significance.

The basic rationale underlying the counselling sessions is that the "human element" which is otherwise absent in a system of distance education needs to be adequately compensated. The learners in distance education come from a variety of backgrounds. Hence, they need different

kinds of help and different approaches to help them. These counselling sessions are not only supposed to break the isolation suffered by distance learners by way of bringing them into contact with the tutor and the fellow learners but are also supposed to facilitate and reinforce their self-learning with the help of resources (physical and human) that are made available to them at the Study Centres. Researches in the field of correspondence education have revealed that personal contact programmes are helpful to students studying at a distance (Singh 1983, Mathur 1979, Sahoo 1985).

Thus, the counselling session presupposes removal of all kinds of barriers to learning via open access, open entry, open choice of subjects and so on when students assemble at the Study Centre and share their experiences and resolve their problems with the help of the Academic Counsellor (IGNOU, 1990).

MAINTAINING CONTACT WITH STUDENTS: THE IGNOU APPROACH

Unlike the traditional Distance Education system, the IGNOU has adopted a variety of approaches to maintain contact with students. The contacts are both Institution based and home based. The direct contact sessions are organised at the Regional Study Centres (RSC) located in different parts of the country. These sessions not only bring the tutor and the students face-to-face but also provide additional learning inputs in terms of Audio and Video programmes to enhance their self-learning.

Contacts are also maintained with the learners rather in an informal and indirect way through the print media viz., the Self-instructional material (SIM) which has a built-in-teacher component for purpose of sustaining motivation and interest in students; the Audio/Video programmes (Cassettes and National telecast/broadcast) serve as another source of contact and bring the teachers to their homes in an indirect way. Assignments which form a component of

continuous evaluation system also serve as yet another source of contact between the tutor and the student. The telephone, the letters written by the tutors to the students and the provision of open channel in the IGNOU News Letter, all serve as effective channels for communication between the tutor and the learner.

COUNSELLING SESSIONS IN IGNOU

The contact session (henceforth CS), organised by IGNOU is 'par excellent' in terms of flexibility, quality of services, variety of inputs and learners' autonomy. The IGNOU organises CS. for every academic programme course. The weightage given to CS. is about 10 percent of the total study hours of an academic programme. However, it is to be noted that CS. are not compulsory for any of the programmes. Since flexibility and learner autonomy are the hallmark of distance education system, compulsory attendance at CS. is not insisted upon.

ORGANISATION OF COUNSELLING SESSIONS

Although the decision regarding weightage to be given to CS. is centralised at the headquarters, the organisational aspect of the CS. is decentralised at the Regional Study Centres. The counselling schedule for the whole programme is drawn up in advance at the time of starting a programme. This schedule is prepared by the Academic Counsellor concerned (appointed for the programme) in consultation with the Coordinator and Assistant coordinator of the RSC. Sometimes student are also consulted to find out the suitability of the CS. The CS. are generally held on Sundays or on other general holidays. The duration of each CS. is about two and half-hours and this may be either a forenoon or afternoon session depending upon the convenience of the students and the Academic Counsellor. An important organisational aspect of this programme is the flexibility of the time and date of sessions which in all probability should suit the convenience of at least majority of distant learners in a given programme. The CS. are conducted in the Regional Study Centres which are well equipped with the required infrastructure.

WHAT GOES ON IN A COUNSELLING SESSION?

A counselling schedule indicating the date, time, duration, venue, the lessons to be covered and the audio/video cassettes to be played would be sent to all distant learners well in advance to enable them to come well prepared for the session. The sessions are mostly interactive wherein the Academic Counsellor initiates and moderates the discussion. The basic idea behind this is to give as much opportunity as possible for the students to participate in the group learning process. Besides, Audio/Video cassettes related to the concerned theme/block are played to reinforce the self-learning. This Audio/Video session is preceded by a preliminary introduction and later followed

by a discussion. Thus, a counselling session of IGNOU is found to be far superior to usual 'contact session's in other distance education programmes offered by conventional universities in terms of its quality of services, additional learning inputs provided and above all the paramount importance attached to the learner.

The question whether contact sessions are really necessary in distance education is debatable since its necessity is by and large determined by the extent of participation of distance learners in these sessions and their (former) subsequent success in the programme. Another question related to this theme is the type or mode of contact that is needed to promote distance learning. Whether the traditional, direct, face-to-face contact is more feasible and effective or indirect non-traditional communication media like the Radio, Television, Telephone, Computer-mediated communications and other interactive Audio-visual Instructional media is more desirable is a different question. Anyway both these questions need to be examined from the view point of both 'users' and 'organisers' of distance education and also in the light of the availability of different kinds of communication technologies and trained personnel for the purpose. The present study, in essence attempts to examine the necessity of contact sessions in distance education and the mode of contact that is desirable. In the backdrop of this, the study is set with the following objectives:

1. to examine what the distance learners feel about the necessity of contact sessions;
2. to see what modes of contacts are preferred by the distance learners;
3. to find out the extent of participation of distance learners in the contact sessions;
4. to identify the problems experienced by learners in making use of the counselling session;
5. to suggest measures to overcome the existing problems and thereby arrive at pointers to the future course of action.

THE STUDY DESIGN AND METHOD

A descriptive survey approach has been adopted for conducting the present study. The study design incorporates analyses and interpretations of qualitative data collected from the distance learners enrolled in IGNOU Regional Centre of Karnataka.

SAMPLE

A representative, purposive random sample has been drawn from the office of the IGNOU Regional Centre, Bangalore. During 1991, the Regional Centre of Karnataka and Goa had recorded an enrolment of 1380 in various programmes like the BDP and other programmes (for details see the notes). These students had enrolled from Study Centres of Bangalore, Mangalore, Dharwar, Gulbarga and Goa. A 10 percent (96) purposive sample of learners from Bangalore Study Centre which had an

enrolment of about 956 in the above mentioned programmes has been selected for the study. The addresses of the sample students were procured from the office of the Bangalore Regional Centre.

Techniques and Tools: A mailed questionnaire survey technique has been used to collect the data for the study. A structured questionnaire covering dimensions of students' background and their views regarding necessity of contact sessions was mailed to each one of the sample respondents. The study had only 50% returns (45) inspite of sending reminders to return the filled in questionnaires.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE DATA

The foregoing paragraphs present an analysis of the primary data collected from 45 distance learners in IGNOU regarding the necessity of contact sessions. As said earlier, the issue addressed here was whether contact sessions are really necessary in distance education and if yes, what mode of contact sessions would be more desirable home-based, Institution-based or community-based?

To a question whether contact sessions are really necessary in distance education, there has been an almost unanimous positive affirmation from the respondents. There are only 3 students out of 45 who do not feel the necessity of contact sessions. Out of these three, one is a female respondent. Further, all the three are students of professional programmes. On analysing the reasons given by the respondents, it is noticed that 'clarifying doubts', 'breaking isolation' and 'maintaining inter-personal relationship', 'gaining deeper insights' and 'understanding of the subject' appear to be the chief reasons which necessitate contact sessions. Whereas those who do not feel the necessity of contact sessions opine that 'people who opt for distance education are mostly middle aged/employed. Their purpose is only to acquire a degree for furthering their prospects, but not for acquiring knowledge. Hence contact sessions are not necessary'. The two male respondents who have not felt the necessity of contact sessions suggest the availability of other modes of communication for establishing contact and they opine that CS. are advisable only if they are localized and easily accessible to the students. The Female respondent opines that CS. are not necessary as most of the learners are preoccupied with other chores and may not be able to attend them.

A considerable number (22 out of 45) of respondents who have felt the necessity of CS. want it provided they are organised properly with the uppermost objective of helping students understand the subject better. This in fact is a crucial factor which needs serious attention to make the existing CS. meaningful and purposeful.

HOW REGULAR ARE STUDENTS IN ATTENDING COUNSELLING SESSIONS?

The CS are not compulsory in IGNOU. However,

owing to the use of audio-video and counselling techniques by the counsellors, distance learners may be motivated to attend the CS. to receive the maximum possible benefits. The following data reveal the extent of attendance put in by the students in the CS:

Table 1: Showing extent of attendance put in by the respondents

Attendance (In %)	Male	Female	Total
<25%	13	3	16
25-50%	7	2	9
50-75%	3	3	6
75% above	6	1	7
Nil	6	1	7
Total	35	10	45

It may be noted that most of the respondents are not regular in attending the CS. There are about 7 respondents who have never attended even a single session. Only about 10% are found to be more regular (75% above). However, those who have put in less than 25% attendance are found to be relatively larger (35%). So also those who are regular to the extent of 50-75% attendance form about 20%. On the whole the data reveal that respondents are more irregular than regular in attending the CS.

On probing further, the following reasons have emerged for their irregularity:

Table 2: Showing reasons for irregular attendance in CS

Reasons	Male	Female	Total
Lack of compulsory provision of attendance	8	—	8
Personal problems (ill-health, domestic etc.)	3	3	6
Distance of the study centre	12	2	14
Lack of adequate transport facility to reach the study centre	1	—	1
Do not feel the necessity of CS as course materials are self-explanatory sufficient	4	—	4
Poor quality of the session	6	—	6
The Audio/Video programmes are broadcast/telecast	2	—	2
Others (specify)	7	3	10

It may be noticed from the table that there are several

reasons for being irregular to the CS of these 'distance of the Study Centre' (14 out of 45); 'personal problems' and 'poor quality of the sessions (6 out of 45 each) have also emerged as other significant reasons for their irregularity. The 'distance' factor which emerged as the most significant factor contributing to irregular attendance in the CS implied that the location of Study Centre should be easily accessible to the students. Surprisingly students hailing from rural and semi-urban regions (11) do not find 'distance' a major reason for their irregular attendance. Rather, it is the urban respondents who find commuting long distance a major hurdle especially when there is no adequate transport facility. A few of them (10 out of 45) have revealed under 'other' reasons that owing to the very nature of their occupations which require frequent touring, they could not attend the CS regularly. 'Poor quality' of the sessions as one of the reasons for being irregular reflects that the Academic Counsellors may be resorting to conventional lecturing in CS which may be demotivating. Anyway this aspect is being further examined a little later.

To another question whether they would favour compulsion for attending CS, a little over 50% respond in the negative. While over 60% of the male respondents do not favour compulsory CS, 9 out of 10 female respondents favour compulsory sessions. Majority of those respondents who do not favour compulsory CS have expressed that it is the prerogative of the student in a distance education system to choose CS. Hence she/he should have complete autonomy in choosing either the media of instruction or in attending the CS. Yet another noticeable revelation is that all those who do not favour compulsion belong to older age group, employed and married. Obviously they find it difficult to attend the CS regularly as they have other pre-occupations and social obligations to attend to.

The Nature of Counselling Sessions: An attempt has also been made to understand the nature of counselling sessions by asking the respondents to indicate the kind of activities done in the CS. The following table reveals the same.

Table 3: Showing Kinds of Activities performed in the CS

Nature of activities	
Mere lecture	10
Lecture-cum-discussion	21
Group Interaction	11
Audio/Video programmes	15
Only discussion	2

It may be noted from the table that major activity performed by Academic Counsellors is lecture-cum-discussion (21 out of 45), followed by Audio/Video programme (15 out of 45), and group interaction (11 out of 45). There are also instances of Academic Counsellors

resorting to 'mere lecturing' (10 out of 45) which is a serious matter of concern. Despite orientation of the Academic Counsellors to the newer tasks and functions that one has to perform in a system of Distance education, it is a sad commentary that they resort to conventional modes of teaching 'rather than facilitating self-learning through group interaction. In fact group interaction would ensure greater participation of the learners thereby enhancing their performance. However, the data reveal that group interaction' is conducted by the Academic Counsellors on only rare occasions.

ARE STUDENTS SATISFIED WITH THE EXISTING COUNSELLING SESSIONS?

An attempt was also made to ascertain the satisfaction of the learners regarding the CS. It is noticed that the opinion is divided between 50-50%. Of those who expressed their dissatisfaction with the CS 5 are females and the remaining 20 are males. On probing further the reasons for their dissatisfaction, it is discovered that a great majority (65%) have indicated 'poor quality' of the sessions which they find uninteresting and boring. To add to this, the respondents felt that the counsellors do not come adequately prepared to conduct the session; they rather repeat the same matter that is found in the course materials. In fact this is a serious reflection on the selection and training procedure of Academic Counsellors. As of now, the selection, appointment and training (Orienting) of Academic Counsellors is decentralised at the respective regional levels. Hence, efforts should be made by the Regional Centres to identify suitable Academic Counsellors and orient them adequately for the purpose. Further, the short-term orientation conducted at the Regional Centres may not be effective in sensitising the counsellors to the nuances of the system and also in imparting the skills and competencies that are required to perform the dual role of counselling and tutoring.

WHAT MODES OF CONTACT ARE PREFERRED BY THE DISTANCE LEARNERS?

To a question regarding the mode of contact that is required in distance education, it is observed that about 30% of the respondents have desired institution based contacts. Further, an equal proportion (22%) have desired 'home-based' contacts and 'small study circles'. A negligible percentage have desired community based contacts. Thus, this analysis suggests that even though other modes of contacts are required to be established, still Institution based contact in distance education cannot be totally done away with.

In the light of the preference expressed by the respondents to various kinds of contacts, an attempt was also made to find out the availability of different kinds of communication media either at learners' home or work place for possible tapping of these media to establish interpersonal contacts. The following table reveals the extent of access to other modes of communication to the

Table 4: Showing availability of communication media at learners' home and work place

Communication media	At Home	At work place
Radio	45	10
T.V.	38	10
Audio Cassette Player	31	7
Video Cassette Player	16	7
Telephone	15	28
Computer	3	20

It may be noted from the table that respondents have access to different kinds of media either at home or work place. Almost all respondents have access to Radio at home. A considerable majority have access to Television (85%) and Audio Cassette player (70%) at home. Over 30% have also access to video cassette player and telephone at home. At work place, relatively a large proportion of respondents have access to telephone and computer. As said earlier making use of Radio & Television channel may curtail flexibility for supply audio/video cassette to learners' home at subsidised cost, thereby enhancing their participation and performance. Similarly, efforts need to be made to utilise the telephone and computer facilities at office for distance learning.

In the context of availability and access to the above mentioned media, an attempt was made to elicit the respondents' views regarding acceptability of these media for establishing contacts with tutors and learners. To a question whether the students would be benefitted much if contacts could be established through the above media, all the respondents excepting three responded in the affirmative. This suggests the need for tapping these media for purpose of making distance education more effective. Besides, students have also preferred (93%) localised small study circles to enable them to come into contact with other co-learners more frequently.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The present study was an attempt in the direction of assessing the necessity of contact sessions in distance education and the desirability of using simulated face-to-face communication through non-traditional media to maintain interpersonal contacts between students and tutors who are otherwise isolated most of the times. The analysis of the data collected through a mailed questionnaire survey of 10% sample (with 45% returns) of students enrolled in the Regional Centre of Karnataka reveals certain caveats.

There is no divided opinion so far as necessity of contact of the learners fail to turn up to the counselling sessions even when organised on holidays and for a

shorter period. IGNOU provides the best student support services unlike the other correspondence directorates of conventional universities in terms of a Regional/Study Centre which is very well equipped with infrastructure facility, a library, audio and video equipments and learning packages. Further, there is also an Academic Counsellor for every 50-60 students who is trained to look after their academic needs as well as counsel them for both their academic problems. Despite these merits, the RSCs are found to be underutilised due to a variety of reasons. Salient among them are 'lack of compulsion' and 'distance' of the Study Centre. While the former cannot be insisted upon in a system of distance education, which attaches supreme importance to learners' autonomy. However, the latter needs reconsideration while locating the Study Centres. The failure of even urban students, leave alone rural students, to make use of the facilities provided at the Study Centres owing to lack of adequate transport facility raises certain questions. At present study centres are opened during regular college hours (as most of them are located in conventional colleges and universities) and on week ends between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. As most distance learners are adults, employed and married with family responsibility, it may not be possible for them to attend the sessions either on week days during 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. which also happens to be their working timings, or on holidays when they feel like spending the weekly holidays with their family and Children. On the other hand if the Study Centres are opened on all week days say, from 7 a.m. till 9 p.m., and academic counsellors are also made to come to the study centres once/twice during these hours, then it may be a great morale booster for distance learners.

Forming 'study circles' involving local students and tutors may also eliminate the feeling of isolation and give the required academic support. Mobile study centres with the provision of counselling facility may also be thought of for reaching of remote corners and rural areas. Otherwise the investments made on the Study Centres may be wasteful and unnecessary. Ways and means of obtaining suitable returns to the investments made on the student support system in IGNOU should be thought of more rationally and realistically.

As regards accessibility to different kinds of media, a great majority of the distance learners have access to both radio and television at home. As of now, national telecast of IGNOU video programmes are beamed all over. However, it is yet to be seen to what extent this is being utilised by the distance learners. Since students have no inhibitions so far as using non-traditional media for maintaining contacts is concerned, ways and means of utilising television with the combination of telephones, computers and other audio accessories should be given serious consideration. Perhaps negotiating with the employers and tapping their communication technologies for possible use of distance education to the benefit of their employees who are desirous of continuing their education may pave way for realising the goals of distance education.

NOTES

BDP (Bachelors Degree Programme),
DIM (Diploma in Management),
ADM (Advanced Diploma in Management),
CFN (Certificate in Food and Nutrition),
BLS (Bachelors Degree in Library Science),
DCWE (Diploma in Creative Writing in English),
DDE (Diploma in Distance Education) and
DCO (Diploma in using Computers in the Office Management).

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