

Open Education Resources and Community Development: Exploring New Pathways of Knowledge in the Field of Higher Education in Assam

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is a deliberation on the issue of community developments through teaching-learning transactions in open and distance learning (ODL) system in Assam, the North Eastern state of India. This system, with its relative newness, has given cause for much debate within India regarding questions of 'openness', modes of pedagogy and teaching, use of adequate resources, the principles nurturing community developments and finally, the ultimate question of 'quality' in education. The continuance of this debate also reflects the difficulty of any adequate theorization which anchors knowledge-dissemination processes in institutions of higher learning on the whole. The absence of such adequate contextual theorization keeps out of sight a sense of complacency in continuing with inherited assumptions regarding academic transactions. As an evolving field in India, and thus in Assam, however, it is clear that unless some clarity is achieved with regard to the assumptions that guide academics in open and distance learning, the problematics of 'quality' and 'equity' must haunt this mode. Hence, in order to achieve some grasp of a field, whose topographical contours seem yet vague and unclear, we not only need to theorize the idea of teaching-learning processes in Distance Education, but also and most importantly the notion of 'openness' itself giving tremendous boost to the issue of community developments through Open Educational Resources (OER). The bulk of the debates surrounding the topic have emerged in Western academic institutions whose basic structures greatly differ from their Indian counterparts thus driving home the point that unless theory and context find a match between them the dismal conditions in which Indian operations are currently conducted will get worse.

In the last five years there has been a remarkable increase in the OER movement. There has also been a strong international debate on how to apply OER in actual practice and the UNESCO chaired a vivid discussion on this through its International Institute of Educational Planning (IIEP). If accessibility actually means to facilitate wider and deeper access to information, to achieve new levels of information management, to improve control over collection and to facilitate sharing of the resources among various educational institutes, Open Educational Resources can bring in a remarkable change in community development. But, along with the advances in ICT, the processes of sharing and distribution of resources too have changed, and the problem we have faced relates to the information requirement of the user community which is never fulfilled. In the changing arena of higher education today, the descriptions of open and distance education have to be expanded to include much more than 'arrangements to enable people to learn at the time, place and space which satisfies their circumstances and requirements.' While Distance Education refers to a kind of learning made possible over a spatial distance between the teacher and the learner, 'Open Education Resources' makes learning available at a place and time of the learner's choice, and at a pace suited to the learner's requirements. While, the theory of 'transactional distance' – a theory that appeared in 1972, stated that distance education is not simply a geographic separation of learners and teachers, but, more importantly, is a pedagogical concept. It is a concept describing the universe of teacher-learner relationships that exist when learners and instructors are separated by space and/ or by time. Michael G. Moore's theory of "transactional distance"¹ has set the norms for the debate on distance learning but the parameters for the same read differently in India. So, in today's educational and cultural contexts, the meaning of 'openness' itself must be redefined as it has to address issues contextually valid and pedagogically relevant. Contextually valid in the sense that we cannot apply the idea of on-

campus learning through ODL and in Assam, resources have to be used optimally thus the compulsion to use digital technologies and ICT beyond the campus. In this paper, an attempt has been made to establish some points which can be seen to constitute certain integral aspects of teaching-learning in the open and distance mode. These are:

1. Learning in ODL must refer to cultural factors over and above psychological theories of learning. ODL pedagogy needs to be considered as being distinct from older methods relevant to classroom teaching. Thus, resource development must follow certain necessary outlines.
2. The design of study material must contain implicit references to institutional infrastructure. Learning materials constitute only one aspect of what is made available to the learner. For the totality of what goes into the learning environment for the distance learner, other institutional infrastructure like information channels are important aspects of the learning process.
3. OER must be based on the levels and degrees of interaction between teacher and target learner that an institution envisages within a programme of study. The ODL system has to revise the idea of teacher-learner contact through various means.
4. Unless ODL comes to embrace in full the connotations of "openness", the system will be cost-effective only in the short-term, an unsustainable mopping-up campaign by older universities playing second fiddle to older face-to-face systems of learning.

TAKING UP THE ISSUE

In an economically underdeveloped and educationally stagnant Indian state like Assam where ODL still needs improvements, OER may be considered a solution to the various problems of outreaching faced by higher education systems. An attempt has been made in this paper to make a very brief survey of the institutes offering education through both the conventional and open universities of Assam and to discuss the role OER can play in the uplift of the present scenario of Higher Education in Assam. Considering the present educational scenario in Assam we find that there are only four major universities in Assam out of which two offer higher education through open and distance learning. However, the establishment of the newest state open university of India namely KKH State Open University in Guwahati, Assam, has drastically changed the development of education in this region. Although we have total twelve universities in the NE, out of these twelve universities we have only one state open university and various directorates of distance educations bringing home the usefulness of the dual mode educational systems in this region. Amongst the dual mode universities mention must be made of Institute of Distance and Open Learning, Gauhati University, Guwahati; Directorate of Distance Education of Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh; The Global Open University, Nagaland, Center for Distance Education, North-East Hills University, Shillong; Institute of Distance Education (IDE) of Rajib Gandhi University, Arunachal Pradesh.

Our experience tells us that the designing of curriculum in most of these universities ordinarily refers to the tried-and-tested pedagogic methods of classroom teaching. Till the other day, the ODL system in Assam, based mainly on the directorates of distance education kept at par with the formal system by simply compiling the items of the normal curriculum into the 'correspondence' channel, that is, whatever can be committed to the printed word on the page. Practice however reveals that this consistently relegates the ODL curriculum to the lower slot in the repertory of courses. In the effort to widen the scope of 'openness', enrolments in the ODL are allowed as a matter of rule without any discipline-based bar so that the student who is admitted into the English (Lit.) programme, can often be an individual who is simply there for the love of learning. The most pertinent question that has to be asked therefore is, does curriculum structure tend to promote 'distancing' of the student from the knowledge-system called "Eng.Lit."? From a considered stand-point this would seem to be the case since the older curricula has turned into a set of rigid criteria demanding purely "literary" competence prior to admittance. At present, only to a limited extent does the course curriculum in ODL institutes not replicate that which does service in traditional programmes. As far as institutional directives go, ODL curricula are meant to be especially designed by collective course-setting to meet the requirements of the learning community at a distance. To that extent, it can be argued that the brief history of a fairly

young movement in modern pedagogical practices contains the scope for adaptations to current needs. Given that the ODL system incorporates – at least at present – innovative strategies in teaching, it should evidently be capable of transmitting much more than used to be assumed in the case of older curricula which were naturally handicapped by the lack of resources. The enrichment of learning environments consequently must be identified as an essential ingredient in the making of academic curricula. Arguably, then, ODL curricula not only stand to advantage in the promotion of interdisciplinarity but also as enriched programmes of study that allow students to gain familiarity with supplementary branches of knowledge. We would do well to remember that these ideals have long inspired scholars of the highest pedigrees.

As we all can see, the growth and penetration of digital technologies in recent years have greatly influenced education and the educational practices in India. The proposed 11th five year plan suggests the allocation of more than 600 hundred crores of rupees specifically for integrating ICT in school education. The Indian Government also has plans to spend abundant resources on information and communications technologies (ICT) aimed at enhancing access and at improving educational quality in India through both the regular and the distance mode. As the Government increases its investments in ICTs for education, continued efforts, must be made to ensure that investments in technology positively impact all aspects of education, including intangible aspects such as community development, inculcating values, psychological and cognitive developments, development of social skills, and development of critical and creative faculty. Of late, the North-East of India has seen tremendous growth in the use of technology to enhance learning through distance mode. In the context of ODL in Assam, many students have found this mode suitable for fulfilling their dreams of personal development, employment and social recognition. There is no doubt about the fact that in the field of Distance Education, e-Learning has created a virtual environment for learning which has made education even more easier and effective. In the context of OER-enabled distance education system in Assam, the Institute of Distance and Open Learning (IDOL), Gauhati University has taken a number of visionary initiatives by launching the first e-portal of the North-East namely www.bodhidroom.idolgu.org on November 13, 2009. This e-portal has given cause for much appreciation of the educational resources other than the SLMs. Formerly known as Post Graduate Correspondence School (PGCS), IDOL, GU has successfully completed ten years in May, 2008 and has also succeeded in translating its mission of spreading and providing quality higher education to all into a reality. This portal, thoughtfully named 'Bodhidroom', will prolifically provide an "Integrated Knowledge Environment". Now, the distance learners of Gauhati University or any student from Assam and the north-east, or any student from anywhere in the world will be able to make use of the OER and enhance their learning with the help of www.bodhidroom.idolgu.org. The new portal has thus become a key tool for the delivery and development of educational contents to be used by teachers, experts and students not only in the North-East but also in the other parts of the world. It is worth-mentioning in this context that IDOL, GU has already started sms alerts and is shortly implementing short-code sms services and online telephone counseling facilities to strengthen its move towards outreaching. It is in this context that IDOL, GU bears testimony of Assam's looming large as a 'knowledge community' in a technology driven world.

Toady, while we are discussing the need for a very strong and self-sufficient support system in ODL, the e-portal, with all its open resources, provides a number of benefits to the users. It has a number of important features like— independent discussion forum and news forum for every programme, online interaction facility with fellow students, faculty members and even officials which also includes the administrative officers of G.U. The idea however is to make room for a collaborative learning environment through interaction. The other features that "Bodhidroom" incorporates are—online study material which can both be studied on-line and downloaded if necessary, old examination question papers so that students can keep themselves aware of the patterns of questions that are asked in the term-end examination, recent activity reports of the members/users, online self-assessment test where a student can test himself/herself on a particular topic or issue. Besides all these, it has provisions for uploading special writings of teachers/experts and a facility where a student can view the list of online participants on a particular topic so that they all can communicate with each other through chatting. As we are told, the teachers can also schedule, deliver and upload live, online classes on course topics which the students can view at any time after logging into "Bodhidroom". By providing more effective and efficient access to information, this e-portal has facilitated improved collaboration and

communication, integration of information and applications, increased document flow and workflow, smarter decision-making and increased productivity. It can even show us the ways in which we can reduce information overload and improve the quality of information while reducing the problems of quality control. Moreover, personalization of features of this e-portal will enable its users to select the information sources in which he or she is most interested. But the real challenge of the e-portal is to present only those information the users mostly require at certain point of time. The portal has shown how even the users can become active “resource” creators and how those resources can be re-used and freely maintained and circulated.

CONCLUSION

The main challenge however is quality improvement and how it can be addressed through modernisation, research, and networking of the universities and other educational departments in this region. Networking through local area network (LAN), wide area network (WAN), Information and Library Network (INFLIBNET) would also lead to increased academic activities and research. The universities of Assam and the NE must be able to remain autonomous in bringing in innovations in teaching-learning through OER. The emphasis should also be laid on conferring autonomous status even on the colleges of Assam so that they can provide means to interact across geographical boundaries of institutions, to improve infrastructure and to start mutual collaboration and cooperation among the higher educational institutes for optimum utilisation of available resources. There is a pressing need to improve the management and governance of the universities to better enforce financial and administrative discipline. Decentralisation of the university system has already been started by IDOL, GU, which has accelerated the process of building the community of learners through its study centers (total no. 10) situated at various parts of the state. The accreditation process is sought to be made more transparent and the whole procedure be based on a system of public appraisal. The burden of responsibility towards social needs of community development stands as a distinct marker of the ODL system thus enjoining upon its practitioners to maintain practices reinforcing ideas of ‘openness’ with reference to the teacher-student relationship. Thus, a mainstay of ODL as experienced in this region of India is the importance it should ideally attach to improvement and the continuous assessment of its learners through feedback arrangements. It does well for us to outline the logistical dimensions of ODL whose cost-effectiveness has supplied *the need* for ‘Open’ systems of learning. In pragmatic terms ‘openness’ translates into diverging practices of transmitting not merely knowledge but also philosophical values.

However, what we have experienced in Assam is that OER itself is a problem in the higher educational institutes. It is barring the learners to learn things best-suited for their self-development. I feel that there is still an Occidentalism at work. We are still following Western norms while preparing OER and imparting education through them. But it is time we went beyond statistics. OER is only the beginning. We must allow our learners to think why at all certain things in the name of SLM or MMM are necessary? Students might feel that they do not require to read/consult certain things. This is what provides the context for OER. The idea of context-based OER instead of the OER borrowed from the West, might be of much help in this region. The fact is that we can only join the OER and be self-motivated to change the contents according to the changing needs of the learners. The pity is that none of the ODL institutes of this region is taking these issues seriously. Moreover, along with OER, modes of evaluation and assessment should also change. Some of the new initiatives IDOL, GU have started relates to the changes in OER itself. The initiatives include easy access from any internet connection, quick and easily available information, involvement of parents and peers in the educational processes, monitoring of self-progress, simple interface for easy data input, improvised communications between policy makers and other stakeholders. Such initiatives have greatly influenced the exploration of new pathways in higher education system of Assam and the entire North-East.

¹ Moore, M. 1997, ‘Theory of transactional distance.’ Keegan D. (ed.) *Theoretical Principles of Distance Education*, Routledge, pp. 22-38.