Title: Education for All: Practical Training for Heterogeneous Groups of Learners-
An IGNOU Experience

Keywords: Program Delivery, Practical Training, Broadcast, FM Radio, Television, MOOC.

Abstract:

The teaching-learning process has undergone a major shift due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The situation has necessitated the use of online media more aggressively to reach out to learners and address their academic needs. However, the digital divide prevalent in many parts of the world is a stumbling block. Academic Programme delivery through technological interventions, having a judicious mix of online and broadcast media, was the solution, Indira Gandhi National Open University thought of while delivering their MA (Journalism & Mass Communication) Programme.

The university has been using various ICTs extensively such as radio, television, interactive radio counselling, broadcast-based teleconferencing, Google Classroom, Google Meet, Face book, WhatsApp, YouTube etc. in complementary and supplementary modes; in addition to printed Self Learning Materials. The use of digital online resources like social media, MOOCs and OERs mixed with traditional broadcasting channels paved the way for skill-oriented training and successful delivery of the programme.

The Context

When the Corona Virus disease (COVID-19), engulfed almost entire world in form of a Pandemic, the loss was not only in terms of human life but its multifarious effects were felt in economic, social and even political sectors. Education systems in the entire region had to gear according to the changing needs. Open and Distance learning and online learning saved the situation to great extent.

The potential of modern communication technologies has a direct bearing on teaching learning process. If thoughtfully and judiciously used, communication technologies can massively and meaningfully extend educational opportunities and improve the quality of education. The National Educational Policy (2020) of India has emphasized the integration and extensive use of technology, including audio/ video/ internet in teaching and learning for increasing the access of education among the eligible learners. However, this requires a basic minimum infrastructure and in some instances a distinct digital divide is visible among the learners.

Pandemic gave a big push to the use of technology driven and supported teaching-learning process. In IGNOU, the printed Self Learning Material was made accessible to learners through the online repository E-Gyankosh. It was supplemented with video lectures via Facebook, Google classroom and satellite TV channels.

Changing Shape of Classroom: Towards Personalized Learning Environment

Change is all-pervasive and inevitable; only the nature of change and the rate at which it takes place varies with time, space and field of operation. In the light of technological developments “classroom” also changed accordingly. Now a distance learner sitting in a virtual classroom at his residence, workplace or study centre can interact with a teacher sitting hundreds of kilometers away in a TV studio or his room. We have travelled a long way in packaging and dissemination of knowledge; from the age old classroom, we have moved towards the virtual and distributed classroom.
With the advancement in technology and innovative ideas in pedagogy, we are gradually moving from general to specific audience and ultimately to an individual. With the proliferation of Smartphone we enter into an era of personal broadcast situation with an individual or small group. All the modern technologies in the area of communication are very well being used for teaching learning purposes.

In Open and Distance Learning - the primary purpose of using multiple media and communication interventions is to reduce the transactional distance between learner and teacher by facilitating better interaction among themselves (Moore, 1993). In Pandemic situation all educational institutions, whether conventional or ODL, came at par. The only prevailing mode of education was Distance education. Every type of educational institution and every type of teaching learning process, primary level to tertiary level, heavily depended on online delivery and transactions thereby merging boundaries of open distance learning and online learning.

**Reach and Status of ICT in India**

Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (2020) statistics shows that more than 90% of India's total population own or use a mobile device. Closer to 1200 million mobile phone subscribers are there in India. Although India's total tele-density is 90%, but there is a vast difference between urban and rural sides – urban tele-density is 145%, and rural tele-density is just 58%. In India, 52% of the population has Internet connections. India has the world's second-largest internet user base after China. It is expected that in 2023, Internet penetration is expected to reach 75% (Statistic, 2020). Out of this user base, nearly 40% of them have mobile net access.

In terms of its reach of up to 68% penetration in Indian households, the television medium is more effective in India. Radio is more prevalent medium with the easy access mode via mobile phones in these times. Given the media prevalence level is uneven among the population, particularly since the new medium has reached just half of the people, it would be ideal to use the ICT medium judiciously along with the highly prevalent media.

**Objective and Methodology**

The main objective of this paper was to analyze the experiences of the School of Journalism and New Media Studies in conducting practical training through modern information and communication technology. This was a qualitative study and the case study method was employed. The school's flagship program, MA in Journalism and Mass Communication (MAJMC), was chosen as the case. Secondary data and the qualitative feedback of the learners were analyzed. The experiences of the faculty were also used in this case study.

**Case Study of IGNOU**

The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) serves the educational aspirations of over 3 million students in India and other countries through 21 Schools of Studies and a network of 67 Regional Centres, around 2,000 Learner Support Centres and 20 overseas institutions. The University offers about 200 certificate, diploma, degree and doctoral programmes. IGNOU is known for its quality study materials. One of the mandates of the University is to reach out to the disadvantaged by offering programmes in all parts of the country at affordable costs. To achieve this objective, the University uses various media and the latest technology in imparting education.

**Delivery of Content: IGNOU Model:**

IGNOU is known for its quality study materials. In addition to printed Self Learning Materials (SLMs), the University has been using various Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) such as radio, television, interactive radio counseling, teleconferencing, etc. in complementary and supplementary modes. However, in the light of the unprecedented developments due to the Covid-19 pandemic during the past two years, the teaching-learning process, like many other areas of human life, has undergone a major shift. In this shift from face-to-face classroom-based teaching to web-based learning environment; various platforms such as Google Classroom, Google Meet, Face book Live etc. are being extensively used. This paper discusses the experience of using various technologies for media and communication programmes of the university, especially for imparting practical knowledge and skill enhancement.
School of Journalism and New Media Studies (SOJNMS)

The School of Journalism & New Media Studies (SOJNMS) was established in 2007 in the University with the mandate to offer quality academic programmes, conduct research and training and organize seminars and workshops in varied aspects of media and communication. In tune with the University's mission and vision, the SOJNMS offers high quality, innovative and need-based programmes at different levels at affordable costs. It reaches out to learners placed in remote and rural areas and those belonging to the disadvantaged and unreached segments of society to access learner-centric quality education, skill up-gradation and training.

Organization of Practical Training for MA (JMC)

It has been found that in case of professional courses a lot of importance is being attached to hands on training and practical experience. In order to address this issue, over the years, the university has been drawing upon the network of partner institutions and programme centres, where the students can avail practical training for its various academic programmes. However, in the light of Covid-19, some of these strategies had to be revised and newer approaches adopted to provide practical training to our learners. In this regard, the School has been making sincere efforts in delivering the practical component through various technological tools and platforms as described in this paper.

Practical training forms an integral part of the two year MA (JMC) programme and is spread over both the years aimed at skill development. The 1st year practical training covers Print and Online Media, and Audio-Visual Media worth 8 credits. The second year practical component includes Research Methodology worth 4 credits. The practical course on Print and Online Media covers news reporting, feature writing, headlines writing, interview techniques, creating and using info graphics, content creation for news portals (writing online news, using audio, video, photographs, Flash, podcasting, streaming, search engine optimization, etc.). The practical course on audio-visual covers audio-visual programme production, radio and television programme formats, writing for radio and television, presentation techniques, basics of camera, lighting, shot composition, editing and post production techniques etc.

A Practical Manual has been developed which provides detailed guidelines for the smooth conduct of training. Teleconferencing is an important component of practical training and is being used extensively. ICT based support is also provided to assist the learners by using suitable technological tools. This academic support, in addition to the printed self learning material, can be clubbed into two broad categories as described below:

A: Broadcast Based Technologies

Gyan Darshan

Gyan Darshan (GD) is a 24-hour educational channel which offers the best of educational programmes covering a variety of subjects and catering to a wide range of viewers. Live interactive sessions every day are also conducted to build interactivity in the ODL system. Teachers/Resource persons and IGNOU functionaries interact on academic and administrative matters with students. GD is also available through webcast, thus extending the reach of IGNOU programmes to audience, the world over.

Gyan Vani

Gyan Vani (GV) FM Radio was conceived in 2001 as a network of educational FM Radio Channels operating from various cities in the country. With an aim to enhance and supplement the teaching-learning process, each GV Station has a range of about 70 kms and covers an entire city/town including the adjoining rural areas. GV serves as an ideal medium for a niche audience addressing the local educational, developmental and socio-cultural requirements of the people. The Interactive Radio Counseling (IRC) facility is being provided by GV stations to enable the students to interact with faculty, academic counsellors and student support staff.
Swayam Prabha

IGNOU is the national coordinator for five channels of Swayam Prabha, the DTH educational channel initiative of the Government of India. IGNOU has been coordinating production of videos and management of these channels. These channels air curriculum based and subject specific programmes for learners in various disciplines.

B: Internet Based (Online) Technologies

Gyandhara

Gyandhara is an internet audio counseling service offered by IGNOU. Students can listen to the live discussions by the teachers and experts on the topic of the day and interact with them through telephone, email and also in chat mode. The Gyandhara streaming is available for internet users anywhere in the world. Like Gyan Vani, this Internet radio is also being used for programme delivery including the practical courses and can be accessed from anywhere on the link - http://www.ignouonline.ac.in/gyandhara/

eGyankosh

eGyankosh is a National Digital Repository to store, index, preserve, distribute and share the digital learning resources developed by ODL Institutions in the country. Learners can find digital text material as well as videos here. The eGyankosh is one of the world’s largest repositories of educational resources in higher education and is available for the learners, teachers, and the public at large for free. The eGyankosh currently houses the self-learning material of over 2500 courses (including practical courses) and an equal number of video programmes of IGNOU. The is available through the link - http://egyankosh.ac.in/

IGNOU e-Content Mobile App

IGNOU-e-Content Mobile App is an official mobile app of the University. This app is an ICT initiative of IGNOU to provide a Digital Learning Environment to learners and extending Technology Enhanced Learner Support Services to them. The aim of this initiative is to disseminate the digitised course material to learners who can use this app to access their course material through their mobile phones and tablets.

Social Media, MOOCs and OERs

Initially, the distance education system was using radio and television broadcasting and audio-video programmes in cassette/ CD modes. The advent of technology and increased access to the internet and mobile phones penetration led to faster and more effective ways to reach out to learners with quality learning materials. Drawing upon their strengths, the SOJNMS programmes are being delivered through various social media platforms.

Various social media platforms such as Face book, WhatsApp and YouTube are being used to provide academic and administrative support to students. Facebook is being used for live lectures as well as for sharing educational content in various formats. The School has its own Facebook page. YouTube is an effective platform for knowledge sharing and is used to disseminate video lectures on both theory and practical courses. WhatsApp groups have been formed to connect learner groups for sharing study material and information related to various courses. In addition, Google Classroom and Google Meet is also being used to deliver different components of the programme. Through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) and Open Educational Resources (OER) the School is offering skill oriented training to different segments of learners.

The Learner of the Course

When we analyze the learners enrolled in the MA (Journalism and Mass Communication) we find that increasing reach of ICT in India is more or less reflected in IGNOU too. Here is a case of MAJMC offered by the School of Journalism and New Media Studies:

In the July 2021 admission cycle total 1321 students enrolled in MAJMC programme. The data indicates that all the learners of MAJMC have an access to mobile and internet. According to admission data, 100% of the enrolled
learners have a mobile connection and an email IDs. Let’s have a look on the learners’ area of residence. It also gives some indications about their frequent access to modern ICT tools. The Fingure-1 shows the area wise distribution of MAJMC learners:

Figure 1: Area wise distribution of MAJMC learners

Around three-fourth (76%) of MAJMC learners come from urban areas, 23% from rural areas and only 1% from tribal areas. It indicates that majority of them are expected to have sufficient exposure and access to modern information and communication technologies.

In the recent past, IGNOU has started offering a 15% discount on the programme fee as an incentive to learners who opt for e-SLM (Soft copy of self-learning material). A considerable number of learners of MAJMC have taken advantage of it and claimed the benefits. In July 2021 cycle, 393 (29.75%) learners of MAJMC have opted for e-SLM [Figure 2].
Reaching the learners and facilitating a pedagogical system in open learning is the biggest challenge. One pattern clearly emerges when we closely observe the admission data that there is a higher concentration of students in few (20) study centres (10 or more learners per Study Centre) and thinly dispersed enrollment of students in most (95) study centres, where number of learners are only in single-digit. These centres with low enrollment are mostly located in suburbs or rural areas. It is observed that 34% of the learners from cities stay quite far away from where their study centre is located.

The admission data of MAJMC (July 2021 admission cycle) shows that a sizable number of learners are employed. A total of 429 (32.50%) learners have declared themselves employed. Many learners falling under the unemployed category may also be involved in part time work or freelancing.

Due to location disadvantage and job related engagement many of the learners might face disconnectedness.

To bridge this disconnectedness, SOJNMS facilitates an Online Learner Support Service (OLSS) to its learners for MAJMC programme. In an experimental approach, Google Classroom is being adapted for the OLSS to deploy the self-learning materials into four quadrants, namely textual learning content, audio-video material, further reading resources and check your progress questions. Along with these four quadrants, a discussion forum is being introduced. Two quadrants (text and check your progress) are sourced from the final approved copies of CRCs, further reading lists and video materials are culled out from reliable online sources.

With the help of these four quadrants and discussion forum, each learner is connected with the faculty of SOJNMS round the clock. SOJNMS would ensure the best teaching and learning services for these learners through their faculty members. Learners can access Google Classroom based OLSS from their computers/laptops or through their smartphones.

**Discussion**

Although the school used a judicious mix of broadcast and online technology to provide practical related content to learners considering their heterogeneity and possible digital divide, the feedback received from learners across different platforms shows that they prefer online platforms more due to flexibility.
Many times requests have been received from learners to provide the recorded teleconference sessions of Gyan Darshan or recorded IRC sessions of Gyan Vani on online platforms such as Google Class Room, YouTube or school's official Facebook page. It seems that distance learners prefer asynchronous (recorded) content more than synchronous (real-time) sessions. It is also natural as many of them are working and unable to attend the synchronous sessions due to their job linked limitations.

The school's experiences show that present online video conferencing platforms are quite effective to deliver practical training in different areas of mass communication including audio-video editing, page designing and website designing. These platforms provide two way audio, two way video, text chat and facility to share the screen. But having computer or laptop with fast internet is the pre-requisite. As far as software is concerned, the school always prefer open source software for all purposes.

The school organizes online workshops and counseling sessions to provide practical training in various fields such as news writing, feature writing, digital journalism, media research, photography and digital audio and video editing. As per the feedback of the learners, they found these online workshops useful for them. Many of them requested to organize these workshops during weekends as they are working people and it was difficult for them to attend on working days. Several learners requested to provide recordings of these sessions. The facility to record these live online sessions is very useful for the learners. The school provided these sessions to them asynchronously through YouTube and shared links of Google Drive.

During the delivery of practical courses, experiences point out that although online platforms are capable of delivering practical content effectively, the instructor-learner ratio is the key factor that decides quality. If this ratio is low then effective two way interaction is possible and learner's queries can be resolved in real time. The bigger instructor-learner ratio makes these interactive online platforms similar to traditional broadcasting mass communication platforms with limited two-way interaction.

**Conclusion:**

IGNOU has an impressive range of communication technologies to deliver its educational content including practical courses of mass communication programmes. This range includes both traditional broadcast media and modern online platforms. At the initial stage of MAJMC programme development, the school was planning to conduct face to face practical workshops at different study centres. During this phase, availability of appropriate infrastructure and human resources emerged as the biggest challenge. To address this issue and handle the situation created by COVID-19, the school opted to offer practical training through information and communication technologies.

The school's experiences highlight that considering the reality of the digital divide, a judicious blend of traditional broadcast technology and modern online tools is the best option to deliver practical components to MAJMC distance learners. The high level of mobile and internet penetration suggests a high share of online platforms. Although modern online tools have an excellent range of interactivity, the teacher-learner ratio is the key factor to ensure proper interactivity which is essential for the delivery of a quality practical component.

And last but not least, the ability to provide asynchronous video and audio sessions with great ease gives online platforms an upper hand especially in the case of distance MAJMC programme where several learners are working people and many times it is difficult for them to attend live sessions. With the 92% mobile penetration, it is for the ODL institutions to have the right kind of mixture and deploy more 'app' based learning facilities along with the regular course delivery structure. Adopting these methods would be a win-win situation for all the stakeholders involved in the teaching learning process, pedagogically and economically.

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