

ISSUES IN COURSE DEVELOPMENT: THE EXPERIENCE AT THE INDIRA GANDHI NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY IN INDIA

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Within its brief existence of 12 years, IGNOU has attracted a mega-enrolment of over half a million students. To cater to this large heterogeneous corpus, it offers 45 programmes comprising 535 courses. Within developing countries, new institutions often adopt/adapt existing course materials from other relatively more established universities either within the country or abroad. However, IGNOU has so far resisted this option and has consistently built a large repository of course materials in print, audio and video. In fact it has assumed a leadership role in materials development for distance education within India, the Middle East and SAARC countries. The aim of this paper is to share the IGNOU experience and generate discussion on how to design and develop course materials within the parameters of relevance, innovation, flexibility, interactivity, the question of language. The final section will focus on quality assurance.

But before we take up these issues, it might be appropriate to look at the different models of course development currently in operation at IGNOU:

- i) Programmes are initiated and planned by the internal faculty and most of the course materials written inhouse. The editing may be done by external experts or inhouse and the formatting as per house style and other coordination work is done by the core faculty. (Followed in the inception stages of the university)
- ii) The course material is written and edited entirely by external experts. The core faculty's role then is limited to transforming the materials as per the norms for self-instructional materials, managing the printing and coordinating the audio-video production process. (Most popular at present)
- iii) A few programmes have been assigned on a project basis to specialist institutions. Internal faculty is responsible for ensuring that the self-instructional materials are adapted to fulfil institutional requirements (B.Tech programme and Banking)
(Pillai & Naidu, 1997: 44-45)

The approach at IGNOU is different from the UKOU, where the course development team comprises subject specialists, media experts, instructional designers, external editors. According to Otto Peters, "the structuring of teaching programmes by course teams is an original idea" of the UKOU but one that "has never really been matched" (1998 : 92) by any other university. Initially there was an attempt at following this model at IGNOU but due to the time factor and deadline requirements as well as lack of human resource the course team was limited simply to internal faculty. External experts, however, are invited for syllabus design and course writing. Even so, the course materials developed are highly rated by other open institutions in India, by students and teachers from conventional universities, and by candidates for the prestigious Civil Services exams. Internationally, the Open University of Hong Kong has acquired IGNOU course materials in English and Management on royalty payment and the COL has designated IGNOU a 'Centre of Excellence' after rigorous scrutiny of the course materials.

Course development models, as we can see from the IGNOU experience evolve (a) according to the needs of particular institutions (b) the available resources and (c) the specific requirements of quality assurance/control. Let us now turn to some key issues in course development.

I. Relevance

How are relevant programmes to be identified? What kind of market research and perspective planning are required to gauge the needs of the potential learner and identify emerging trends in the market? At IGNOU, new programmes are identified either by (a) the internal faculty or (b) by an external agency. In the latter case, funding usually accompanies the request. Presently the most popular at IGNOU are the professional programmes such as management and computers with academic programmes attracting the lowest enrolments. However, there is a perceptible decline in management admissions while computer admission graphs continue to rise. What is the future of these programmes? What other professional areas will market trends open up? What provisions can we make for dealing with the problem of unemployment by training entrepreneurs?

While 'relevance' is often linked to the demands of the employment market, it is also important to see it in social terms. All societies are today faced "with an acute crisis in social cohesion". (Delors, 1996:54). Social cohesion can be based on a sense of shared values – something that only a value-based education can provide. Education is not simply meant to prepare one for employment but must also prepare individuals for 'critical reflection'. For as Richard Shaull points out in his introduction to Paulo Freire's book:

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes 'the practice of freedom', by means of which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of the world (1972 : 13-14).

The "transformation of the world" is possible only after the transformation of one's own perceptions. It is for this reason that awareness generating programmes such as the Panchayati Raj for grassroots functionaries and a programme on Women's Empowerment have been taken up.

Innovation

Innovation has a bearing on 3 complementary areas (a) relevance of the programme (b) design and development and (c) different approaches to delivery. At IGNOU, in addition to the professional and academic programmes such as MBA, BA, B.Sc. etc, innovative programmes in the areas of awareness-generation and vocational courses for workers in the construction and leather industries have been developed. The latter 2 programmes are innovative in design, development and delivery.

IGNOU has a standardized format for developing self-instructional materials. The Unit has a structure, an outline, a statement of objectives in behavioural terms, an introduction, a discussion of the main themes, recapitulations, glossary, a reading list and self-check exercises. This is particularly suitable for Indian students, who have emerged from a school system that still encourages the authority of both the tutor and the printed word. While different programmes elicit different levels of motivation and dictate diverse learning styles, in general, Indian students prefer to be taught in a structured manner, with points, repetitions, copious explanations and clearcut solutions.

The construction and leather industry courses aim to enhance the competence of the learner and provide 'knowledge at work' rather than 'knowledge to work'. In order to be effective there has to be a close liaison with the industry/employer concerned so that the course development process:

- (a) defines the competencies required as per learner expectations
- (b) develops relevant criteria to assess the performance standards achieved and
- (c) develops course materials to suit these specific objectives.

The innovation lies in both the approach and the process of course development.

Innovative course delivery is introduced in B.Sc nursing which is only delivered through Programme Centres located in medical colleges. IGNOU has also introduced diversified delivery systems in the form of Distance Learning Facilitators and Partner Institutions to extend its outreach.

Flexibility

In order to be learner-centred, open learning systems must provide flexibility in terms of entry points, course combinations and mobility from one programme/institution to another. IGNOU programmes have a modular structure which enable the learner to collect credits and complete the programme at her own pace, according to her own need and ability. Different learners have different learning styles and flexibility can be built into materials by introducing smaller modules that can be transferred to other programmes. However, for meaningful transference to occur, we ought to keep in mind :

- i) the number of credits – and how these fit in with the structure of the target programme
- ii) the question of level – for example, only a postgraduate level programme can be fitted into another postgraduate programme
- iii) whether the course/module being transferred will fulfil the objectives of the target programme.

Interactivity

The learner is not simply a passive consumer of knowledge nor the course material an inert pre-prepared package that can be retailed to the willing and the able. The aim of education, among other things, is to activate the dormant critical and analytical abilities of the learner so that she is better able to deal with her environment. As such the course materials must be dialogic – that is, able to evoke a response and trigger off ideas. The interactivity must be ensured both in the matter and the manner – that is, in the content and its presentation.

The Self-Instructional Materials at IGNOU are designed to be interactive. The study material is written in first person conversational rather than textbook style, in comprehensible language that addresses the learner directly and carries a range of access devices. The thematic discussions raise thought-provoking questions which are not left open-ended but provide possible solutions, even though these may not be provided immediately. The format aims to motivate the student, facilitate learning and assimilation by clear and systematic presentation of material, reinforce by repetition and encourage by regular self-check exercises. The style then is that of a ‘guided didactic conversation’, as Holmberg puts it and the aim is to promote ‘learner autonomy’ (Wedemeyer).

As course materials are written by teachers from conventional universities, who are not distance educators, how does one ensure that interactivity will be built into the units? This can be done by detailed briefing, frequent discussion, wherever and whenever possible, and rigorous editing. IGNOU also has a system of assessment through assignment or open book exams. These are evaluated and sent back to the students with detailed comments and suggestions. The assignments are an interactive pedagogic component of the course materials and provides an important feedback channel. As such, stringent monitoring mechanisms are required to see that proper implementation occurs.

Language

Students at IGNOU can opt to study their course materials either in English or in Hindi. For the Hindi medium students, the course materials are translated from the originals written in English. The number of those who study through the English medium is large varying in competence from those with near-native competence to those who are very poor in English. The students then study a subject not in their mother tongue but in a second language. Prof. B.N. Koul has suggested that ‘simplification or writing in simple English’, ‘glossaries or instant language aids’ and ‘face-to-face’ component can help in resolving language problems. He adds that ‘compulsory parallel communication skills courses’ and ‘study skills’ components can provide the requisite techniques for coping with study materials. (1992: 40-41)

The materials to be translated pose their own set of problems. These are related to the secondary status that translation has suffered from and the meagre remunerations assigned to this activity have not attracted the best talent. As such the quality of translations generally leaves much to be desired. In addition, the translator is not necessarily the subject expert and hence there is a problem of interpreting concepts and technical terms into the target language. There is also a paucity of a standardized glossaries for technical terms and sometimes the translation becomes unrecognisable or is done in such sanskritized Hindi that it defies comprehension. The only possible solutions for such problems are:

- 1) a recognition of the importance of translation in a multi-lingual society and of commensurate incentives to translators

- 2) the need for the translator and subject expert to work together
- 3) the necessity of rigorous vetting and evaluation
- 4) the use of language of everyday speech as far as possible.

The language question has yet another dimension -- that of gender. The linguistic content of the course materials must be non-sexist and unbiased. The UKOU has prepared a booklet *Equal Opportunities Guidelines for Language and Image* (1993) for circulation to all its full-time and part-time staff. Research has shown that women respond more favourably to texts that have gender-inclusive language (Ontario Women's Directorate, 1993). Kirkup and Taylor have pointed out that in distance education 'the appropriate use of language is perhaps more important since the student learns through text and broadcast media' (1993 : 178). How to explain difficult terms in comprehensible language, how to translate accurately and how to make language gender-inclusive are questions that have a direct bearing on the course development process at IGNOU.

Quality

The quality of IGNOU materials has been endorsed both nationally and internationally – the COL after rigorous scrutiny designated IGNOU a Centre of Excellence. However, the pursuit of excellence is an on-going process. At IGNOU quality control is inbuilt in the process of course development. The faculty/course team selects the course designers and writers from among the best experts available in the country. The materials written are then edited by yet another expert but in recent years, because of the demands of the deadline, most editing is done by inhouse faculty, who may or may not have the requisite expertise in the specific area concerned. The quality of materials may be in danger of compromise. As the material produced is open to scrutiny, it is extremely important that it undergoes proper authentication so that plagiarism is not possible. Materials must be revised so that recent developments in the field can be incorporated. At IGNOU, there is a provision for revision every 5 years, but so far the number of courses that have been revised is minimal. Wherever full course revisions are not possible/needed, supplementary materials can be provided.

Certain performance indicators can be used as a framework for quality assurance as Parsuraman et al (1991) suggest in the context of customer services. Modified to the needs of course development, these can provide useful guidelines.

- I. **Reliability** – This would mean the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. In terms of course materials this would mean
 - (i) Promises redeemed – The programme guide must accurately and dependably communicate the objectives of the programme. How far do they provide guidelines for negotiating both the system and the programme? The pre-admission information provided to the student must be realistic and modest.
 - (ii) Course materials – how relevant are they to the needs of the students? Are they updated? Do they fulfil the stated objectives? The objectives must be stated in realistic terms if student expectations are not to be frustrated.
 - (iii) Course-related services such as practicals/hands-on work must be arranged as promised. Feedback on assignments, evaluation and results must be with students on time. The aim must not simply be satisfaction but delight and this can be achieved when students receive more than they expected.
- II. **Tangibles** – appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, communication materials.
 - (i) Study Materials – must have attractive layouts, format, covers etc. Here the judicious use of illustrations helps make materials more presentable and attractive.
 - (ii) Newsletters, letters and other communications sent to students must be friendly, brief and address their needs.
 - (iii) The counsellors/tutors – are the contact persons for the students and they must have the efficiency, information, training and knowledge to enable them to interact with students in a meaningful way.
- III. **Responsiveness** – Willingness to help students and provide prompt service. Students have several queries related to course material and the system, which is new for most of them. Dropout and attrition rates are high in distance education institutions and our response and attitude to students will determine whether initial motivation levels can be sustained or not.

- IV. **Assurance** – Knowledge and courtesy of staff and their ability to instil trust and confidence in the student. The competence and credibility of those who write and edit course materials will inspire confidence in the students. In addition the process of curriculum design, development and maintenance must be rigorous enough to assure the quality of courses. Above all, quality is measurable in terms of the value that the market attaches to our degrees, and this is quantifiable in terms of quick employment and promotions for our students.
- V. **Empathy** – Caring, individualised attention provided to students. This goes beyond mere responsiveness to a plane of sincere human communication. Indian students, coming as they do from an oral culture, value face to face communication and it is here that the instructional support system must complement the course package.

In order to ensure the quality of course materials we could

- (a) give edited courses to external evaluators for further validation before printing, deadlines permitting.
- (b) Put edited materials for peer-scrutiny to the available faculty.
- (c) Solicit student feedback by enclosing a questionnaire with each course to determine (i) language comprehensibility (ii) accessibility of content (iii) interactivity of self-instructional materials (iv) relevance and challenging nature of course content/exercises. This data would help the revision and refinement process.
- (d) Share experiences with other institutions to devise/adopt successful strategies.

However, as Adrian Kirkwood, reminds us:

The production and use of high quality materials does not, of itself, ensure an improvement in the educational process – In fact, the resources devoted to such productions can introduce problems for institutions and for the overall quality of students' learning experiences, if a reduced level of support is available to learners as a consequence (1998:239).

Therefore the question of quality cannot simply be seen in isolation but extends right across the whole spectrum – from development to delivery to sustained learning support. Quality course development demands that the strategies devised must be strictly implemented if standards are to be maintained. For at stake is not simply institutional credibility but also the future of distance and open learning.

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