

Theme: SOCIAL JUSTICE

Empowerment through literature: potential & prospects of odl

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Increasingly, Distance Learning is becoming the medium of choice for education. Earlier, it was, to a great extent chosen out of compulsion due to various factors: geographical remoteness, professional commitments, lack of access to educational institutions and so on. Now, there is a marked shift away from conventional, formal education towards the open learning system and one can see students enrolling for ODL courses even if they are conveniently situated and within access to formal institutions of repute. Factors such as flexibility and independent study influence student choice to a significant extent. Formal education in a conventional, straitjacketed setup is now facing a stiff challenge from the more liberal – and liberating – open mode.

If we are prepared to take a good look at education and training, the process of formal education (school, college, and university) works for some. It is hit and miss for others and fails to have significant impact on the lives of many more. At best, formal education could be described as a haptic activity housed in a rigid timeserving framework established for administrative convenience rather than an outcome for the learner. (Forsyth, 15).

With increasing access to the Internet and Web-based resources, students are now able to tap into sources of knowledge that were earlier unavailable to them. Teachers – in past years unwaveringly accepted as the undisputed fount of knowledge – and their control over the classroom are now being challenged and their perceived status as the sole authority and knowledge-giver is no longer valid. Technological advances have shifted the process of learning from its previous teacher-dominated position to a learner-centred one. This shift now requires the teacher not to merely ‘give’ knowledge but guide students to analyse and select what is most relevant and necessary from the bewildering array of information spread out before them. In effect, the teacher performs the role of a facilitator who helps the students to make wise choices but who essentially, urges them on to navigate on their own. This is ideal ODL practice.

Courses offered through distance learning must therefore, fulfil the expectations and satisfy the needs of those enrolling in them in ever increasing numbers.

When we talk about education as a means of achieving social justice, one might well ask, why teach literature? The answer would be that by teaching literature we equip students with a level of sophistication that enables them to view, compare, analyse and internalise cultural values and relate them to real life situations. They are thus in the position of making an informed choice when confronted with complex dilemmas in their own life.

Literature, as is so often said, is a mirror held up to society and frequently not merely tells a story or articulates an idea but also narrates the self, the community, the nation and is a potent weapon for subversion and change. What a course in Literature would ideally aim at doing is to offer students the opportunity to engage in literary-critical discourse as participants in a significant socio-cultural process. A course in Literature should engage students in all the processes that are central not just to the discipline but also to any language. Thus, reading, which is the first step of the progressive discursive stages of analysis, interpretation and evaluation, would be accompanied by honing skills that help to communicate effectively i.e., listening, speaking and writing as well. It is essential to focus on the ways in which independent and critical student participation can be encouraged.

Literature cannot be divorced from language and, as the poet Robert Frost said in another context, yield who will to their separation, the sensible and sensitive teacher would not like to view language and literature as separate entities encased in water tight compartments. Having said that, the natural corollary to this would be that teaching literature would not be very different to teaching language through the ODL system. Of course, to teach literature - especially poetry or plays with dialogues that mostly rely on being read aloud for music and shades of tone that bring out the meaning – through the distance mode can be a daunting task. The challenges are many but some possible solutions to the difficulties of teaching literature through the distance mode could be methods like blended learning, online learning, use of audio-video materials and so on. In the context of a multilingual developing country like India where English plays a key role in empowering the powerless through quality education, it is essential to explore as many paths as practically possible.

Jennings and Ottewill (1996) argue that 'a commonly held belief is that there is a clear dichotomy between open learning and face-to-face tuition. However the two should be seen as complementary approaches to learning rather than alternatives. Face to face tuition and open learning enjoy a symbiotic relationship, which even when used in conjunction with one another,

leads to substantial value added for the learning experience of the student to the tutor and for the institution' (13).

In the classroom where it is possible to have face to face dialogue, the teacher can make use of both audio as well as visual cues – body language, inflection – which would serve to emphasise, focus on and draw attention to certain aspects that the Instructor wishes to highlight – something that might not be possible in an online learning environment dialogue group. Visual and verbal cues work both ways. An experienced teacher can usually determine whether the students are able to understand what is being discussed in the class.

The most important thing to keep in mind while planning a literature course for distance learners is that the learner should not feel as though s/he is not in a classroom. While printed material is all very fine, there is the crucial need to actually hear and to see someone reading out various texts or explaining them. In addition to what has already been mentioned (reading poetry or dialogues out loud in order to bring out the nuances of meaning), this also helps in establishing the extra dimensional human contact between the teacher and taught. Also, when dealing in a language that is not native to the student, listening provides tips on correct pronunciation, stress patterns, intonation etc., all so crucial not only to communication and intelligibility but also to the music of that particular language that can be accessed through its literature.

What does any student – whether in the conventional or the ODL mode – expect from a literature class? Apart from obvious things such as availability of texts, the student's wish list would include a reference guide that would help him/her navigate the paths of cross-cultural references in the prescribed texts, detailed explanations, pointers to literary devices used by the authors and critical material. All or only some of this may be readily accessed by them at local libraries depending on where they are situated so it is necessary to make this information a part of the study materials package.

For students who are also engaged in other activities – working for instance - access to study materials through the Internet or CD ROMs would help in significant ways. If they could tap into online dictionaries, print reference material or texts – apart of course from course websites that offer the necessary links – this would ensure that they get the most out of the course and stay with it for the long haul. Also, intranet access to the University's library would be a great boon.

Introductory modules must arouse students' interest in the study of Literature, sustain their initial enthusiasm and aim to increase it. The students must 'engage' with the study materials in ways that connect and reinforce previous knowledge – what already exists in their sphere of awareness. This naturally implies that the teacher is familiar with the background and environment of the learners, their experience not only of the world but also of literature, their expectations,

enthusiasm to participate, their aspirations vis-à-vis the course etc., and is able to harness their experience, preconceptions and skills so as to channelise them into the appropriate paths. But this is hardly such an easy task even in the conventional mode where teachers are often confronted with the prospect of engaging large classes and more so in the distant mode. So we need to think and re think the ways in which we can involve all our students from the beginning of the course.

We can begin with an activity that draws upon their own experiences of reading/watching a movie/serialised story on TV and then take it from there instead of beginning with long, dry modules that set out the history of a particular literature.

An activity that involves students' watching a film for instance, could be followed up with questions that provides some direction to their thinking. Later, these apparently diverse, sometimes similar, elements can be brought together to cohere meaningfully in the units that follow. Since most of the activities would involve reading a story, a play or a poem, depending on the genre one is focusing on, the questions that follow would initiate them into the process of reading, analysis, interpretation and evaluation.

In a Literature course taught through the distance mode, the reading done by students is largely independent, away from the gaze or monitoring of the teacher. So, while this is an activity that would presumably take up most of their time, it is also one over which the teacher does not have much control. It would be wrong to assume that because students have opted for a literature course, they know how to read a literary text. It is therefore important to offer guidelines on how to read literary texts of various types.

Guided reading activities could be structured in such a way that students are metaphorically led down the path that the literary text explores much like a tourist guide would. Asking them to stop and think at a particular point and telling them why they should do so; what they need to think at another point; how to relate it to what went before; why they might need to go back and read something again etc. are just some pointers. An integral part of these activities would of course be the introduction of key terms, literary concepts or analytical categories.

The distance learner needs to be highly motivated in order to stay with the course for the full term and, without the perception of actual contact with the tutor, however nebulous it may be, there would be the tendency to slacken off or drop out altogether. So how does one go about establishing this kind of contact? Online audio teaching is a great option but in a country like India where a sizeable number of the students do not have access to computers or the Internet, this constitutes a major stumbling block.

Lectures on audio/video CD's that can go with the study materials have an edge over conventional classroom teaching in that they can be paused, rewound and re heard a number of

times till the listener is satisfied that s/he has understood all that has been recorded. PowerPoint presentations on CD's along with narrations that are richer than the text on the slides would give students a feeling of a classroom session. The teacher must anticipate all possible questions, difficulties etc, while preparing the presentation. This would then be followed up with a group online/TV/radio/phone or video conferencing session that would have live interaction with questions, comments and so on being exchanged not only between the teacher and the students but among students as well like in a real classroom.

Learning with multimedia can be interesting and attractive as compared to the lecture mode or just reading textbooks as it offers more opportunities to the teacher as well as the learner to interact in diverse ways with the text. Screen adaptations of a literary text for example, if available with the study materials, would be a great entry point into the dynamics of the text.

It would be a good idea to include a CD/tape that has prescribed poems and plays read aloud by professionals with all the shades of emotion and meaning brought out effectively. In addition, the guided reading activities could also be put into an audio CD/cassette or provided online with all the relevant links so that the student can go back to them again and again as many times as needed and the material could be used for each successive batch of students as well.

The old fashioned lecture has many advantages and should not be discarded as obsolete. The lecture mode is of great significance if we consider how it can – and is – used to make relevant connections for the student, to sustain their interest, to provide a perspective and context in which their specific topic may be placed and at the end of it, to sum up and highlight important aspects of study. Students can thus experience for themselves how a topic is introduced, built up and fleshed out through appropriate illustrations.

At present, while IGNOU provides live sessions on TV through the EDUSAT, all students cannot access it as not all cable providers make the channel available. The authorities concerned must be approached and strongly urged to make the telecast of this channel mandatory for all providers. This will guarantee that each and every student – no matter how remotely situated – can access the channel at home since almost all homes have a TV these days. In addition, in order to encourage viewing/listening, assignments must be based on specific segments that have been telecast/broadcast. A single session might be missed by students due to professional commitments or other reasons. Why cannot there be repeat telecasts/broadcasts of each session? If commercial channels can repeat soap opera episodes ad nauseam, surely this would be for a much worthier cause?

Creating Group Accounts on a social networking site where there are discussions in the form of posts or Wall notifications is also possible. However, control over the addition or revision of data,

uploading of pictures etc., should be under the control of the teacher. Often, students who may be hesitant to pose questions in a classroom find it easier to do so in a post. A class Wiki can also be created to complement this and a synopsis of previous sessions can be uploaded so that anyone who has missed a session can still remain updated. This ensures that contact is maintained.

Using mobile phones for sending out alerts regarding telecast/broadcast of a specific module and when it would be repeated, informing students about assignment deadlines etc is also another way of keeping in touch and of making the students feel that they have not just been left to drift on a vast ocean of information but that there is someone aware of their needs. In fact, harnessing mobile technology would be of great benefit for both teachers and students. Like the TV, the mobile phone has become a ubiquitous accessory and can therefore be used to download assignments, lessons, take online quizzes etc.

Community radio that has been used so effectively in the Australian outback and other places to cater to students in remote areas is another medium that needs to be explored and put into place. Radios and transistors are cheap, can be carried around easily and do not require Internet access or electricity.

Students must be encouraged to peruse their texts closely instead of just relying on the study materials for a summary of a novel, short story or play. Setting objective or multiple-choice questions for both the assignments and the term end examinations could ensure this. In addition, regular quizzes, assignments etc must be set, attempted by candidates and monitored by designated tutors so that there is an ongoing process of engagement with the texts and study materials. At the same time, students must be encouraged to review their own work by providing them with a checklist that will help them to assess whether they have addressed all parts of the questions appropriately and sufficiently. Also, 'check your progress' modules should be an integral part of the programme with regular checking of their answers by the course coordinators or other examiners. This monitoring will ensure not only that students are reading the study materials but will also correct errors and reinforce what has been learned at each stage instead of leaving the learner to regurgitate mindlessly crammed facts at the term end examinations.

The importance of quick feedback to student assignments cannot be emphasised enough. Lucid, constructively phrased comments should focus on errors to talk about the next task so that they are not repeated. If the tutor finds or anticipates that there may be areas where many students may get things wrong, it might be a good idea to make a list of pointers and put them up on the Web, post it through conventional mail or through a text message to all the students. In the course of time, the teacher may well find that s/he has a sizeable number of comments which could be circulated at the commencement of the course/specific section as effective guidelines.

The point is not to hold fast only to the traditional methods we are familiar and comfortable with like the lecture mode, essay type exam questions or activities that involve only doing a set project or dissertation but to use one's imagination, experience and perspective of putting oneself in the students' place and thinking of what might work most effectively.

A Literature course offered through the distance mode in today's world needs the perspective of an integrated approach in which lectures, online materials, community radio, class wiki, interactive TV sessions, multimedia support materials and mobile technological interface would fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Each would be an indispensable part of the composite picture that would allow a student not only to study towards a degree or a job but also to indulge in the sheer pleasure of reading literature and work towards the development of a critical, analytical, interpretative faculty that is the true mark of an educated – as distinguished from the merely literate – person of the modern world.

References

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