

FULL VERSION OF THE PAPER

**Community Development
Innovative Pathways to Knowledge Society**

ODL Technologies for Lifelong Learning in India: Possibilities and Strategies

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BACKGROUND

The changing landscape of learning is helping India to emerge as a technology driven knowledge based society and economy. The success of any knowledge based society and economy depends on promoting the acquisition of key competences and broadening opportunities for innovative and more flexible forms of learning for every citizen of the country. The necessity to adjust to the prerequisites of the knowledge based society and economy brought about the need for lifelong learning in India. The XI Plan Guidelines of University Grants Commission, India on Lifelong Learning and extension (UGC 2007) states, "The country's economic performance depends critically on access to and the adoption of new technology and improving the skills of the labor force. Since 92.4% of India's workforce is in the unorganized sectors, they need regular upgrading of skills to compete in the globalize economy. Equipping the labor force with relevant skills implies the need for creating a variety of learning and training opportunities."

Especially within the context of the current knowledge economy, it is of vital importance that the Indian workforce obtains and retains an optimal level of knowledge and skills. The country's economic performance depends critically on access to and the adoption of new technology and improving the skills of the labor force. Since 92.4% of India's workforce is in the unorganized sectors, they need regular upgrading of skills to compete in the globalize economy. Equipping the labor force with relevant skills implies the need for creating a variety of learning and training opportunities. One of the ways to obtain this goal is improved and continuing lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is of key importance for individuals of all ages and holds an array of benefits for them and society. It promotes their full economic and societal participation, enables them to be better informed and more active citizens, contributes to their personal well being and fulfillment, supports their creativity and innovation, and increases their efficiency as workers or volunteers.

LIFELONG LEARNING: KEY FOR MAKING INDIA KNOWLEDGE-BASED SOCIETY

"Lifelong learning", according to Royce (1999, p. 149), "Aims to give students the skills to go on learning throughout life and also positive attitudes towards learning which accept and even welcome change and new learning." While, Schuller & Watson (2009, p.2) suggests, "Lifelong learning includes people of all ages learning in a variety of contexts – in educational institutions, at work, at home and through leisure activities. It focuses mainly on adults returning to organized learning rather than on the initial period of education or on incidental learning." The necessity to adjust to the prerequisites of the knowledge based society and economy brought about the need for lifelong learning for all in India. Keese (2007, p. 81) confirms the utility of lifelong learning, "A range of evidence points to clear economic benefits from lifelong learning both for individuals and

for society as a whole.” All these observations clearly establish that Lifelong learning is instrumental to meet societal or individual developmental challenges in India.

The concept of lifelong learning stresses that learning and education are related to life as a whole - not just to work - and that learning throughout life is a continuum that should run from cradle to grave. In nutshell, lifelong learning promotes the development of knowledge and competences to enable each citizen to adapt to the knowledge-based society and actively participate in all spheres of social and economic life. Therefore, provisions of life long learning to different sections of Indian society may help them to continue developing on a personal level, having greater individual autonomy and making a more active and productive contributor to society. A country like India having varied social, educational, economical and developmental standards demands the exploration and implementation of innovative ways to provide lifelong learning opportunities to every citizen. ODL technologies present numerous possibilities to fulfill the promise of lifelong learning for all in India.

ODL TECHNOLOGIES: KEY FOR PROMOTING LIFELONG LEARNING IN INDIA

In efforts to meet the new and changing demands for education and training, open and distance learning may be seen as an approach that is at least complementary and under certain circumstances an appropriate substitute for the face-to-face methods that still dominate most educational systems. While its benefits can be evaluated by technical, social and economic criteria, distance learning methods also have their own pedagogical merit, leading to different ways of conceiving knowledge generation and acquisition (Moore& Tait 2002, p.20).

Talking about her experiences to use ODL for lifelong learning, Jakkamal (2009) explains, “I watch television to learn something about agriculture and goat rearing. Whenever I come across any experts, I discuss with them about the various aspects of agriculture and animal husbandry. I use my mobile phones mostly for talking to experts, SHG members and listening to the audio messages. I can explain the differences between conventional learning and ODL. This type of lifelong learning has helped me to improve my goat rearing abilities particularly in buying good breed, better feed and health management etc.”

Brien (2007) in his study reported that ‘when a group of older adults, age 55-75, were asked if they would be interested in lifelong learning and living in a college atmosphere, more than half of the respondents said they like the idea of retiring to a home on a college campus’. UCLA scientists have found that middle-aged and older adults with little Internet experience were able to trigger key centres in the brain that control decision-making and complex reasoning after just one week of surfing the Web. Their research suggests that Internet training can stimulate neural activation patterns and potentially could enhance brain function and cognition in older adults.

A Report by Commission of European Communities (2008) observes, “ICT can extend the scope of education and training and be instrumental in providing new educational services at all stages in life. The need for this is not in doubt. ICT-based tools can provide unprecedented accessibility to address these needs”. The Report further suggests, “ICT can help to build and support a learning continuum, including formal, informal and non-formal learning so helping achieve lifelong learning. More should be done to increase the levels of confidence, upgrading the digital competences and to shift from access to quality of use of ICT for learning.” These observations lead us to think that ‘ODL Technologies supported Lifelong Learning’ has the potential to offer new opportunities for bridging the distinction between learning, work and leisure in Indian society.

USING ODL TECHNOLOGIES TO PROMOTE LIFELONG LEARNING IN INDIA: KEY STRATEGIES

ODL is changing the access to knowledge, the process of learning, and the delivery of education and training all over the world including Asian communities. Ramasamy & Selvaraj (2007) suggest that contributions of conventional methods of delivering education had limited success.

Innovative open, distance and technology-mediated learning offer a more realistic alternative as it allows for open access to quality education and increases the capacity of the university to respond to growing demands for quality undergraduate and graduate education.

New innovative pedagogical and didactical approaches are needed to take into account the future learning needs and changing skills and competences necessary for employment, self development and participation in a knowledge-based, digital society. ICT provides the means to support personalization, where learners are also considered to be knowledge builders and creators and not just the recipients of transmitted knowledge (Commission of European Communities 2008).

Following these dictums, the need of the hour is that we will focus about possibilities of using key ODL technologies -Print medium, Radio, Television, Mobile Telephony, and Internet and Computer networks for promoting lifelong learning in India. The following strategies may be useful to fulfil this task.

(A) Print Medium

Print media is one of the well established educational medium in India. As a result of the increasing rate of literacy, the number of people reading newspapers and magazines are increasing in India. Taking advantage of this situation, following strategies may be adopted to utilize print medium for promoting lifelong learning in India.

- News papers and magazines may publish specific “Lifelong Learning” sections on regular basis. Through these sections, they may provide details about institutions offering lifelong learning programmes, training opportunities, lifelong learning guidance and other relevant information to the learners.
- Print media can make a difference by giving prominent news coverage and dedicated space to the lifelong learning. The magazines may also publish specific lifelong issues targeting adult learners and workers.
- Print media may also play an important and determining role in educating, creating awareness and transmitting crucial information about lifelong learning issues so that adult learners and workers become aware, remain alert and take measures to learn on continuous basis.

(B) Radio

Radio broadcast, both for information and education, is fairly old in India. Expansion of radio transmission has been rapid, and today there are over 197 radio stations, including 184 full-fledged stations, 10 relay stations and three exclusive commercial radio stations reaching 97.3% of the population and 90% of the geographical area (GOI 2002; 2003). The radio has immense reach in India and radio listening still remains an important source of information for a large number of listeners particularly in rural India.

Considering the popularity of radio, following strategies may be adopted to offer radio supported lifelong learning.

- Phone-in-programs by Radio particularly on *Gyan Vani* may be helpful to create awareness and provide information about lifelong learning. These programs will help learners to put up their learning needs and queries with anchors/experts. These programs will further help subject experts to offer lifelong learning counseling to the willing learners.
- Government and other agencies may also use radio to popularize and advertise about existing lifelong learning programmes and opportunities to masses.

- About seventy percent population of India lives in rural sector and they mainly require lifelong information about agriculture and related occupations. Radio can help a lot in this aspect as radio listening is quite popular in rural India. Taking this trend in side, programs based on different aspects of lifelong learning programs may be aired on Radio on regular basis.

(C) Television

As per the TAM Annual Universe Update (2010), India now has over 134 million households (out of 223 million) with television sets, of which over 103 million have access to Cable TV or Satellite TV, including 20 million households are DTH subscribers. In Urban India, 85% of all households have a TV and over 70% of all households have access to Satellite, Cable or DTH services. TV owning households have been growing at between 8-10%, while growth in Satellite/Cable homes exceeded 15% and DTH subscribers grew 28% over 2009. It is also estimated that India now has over 500 million TV channels covering all the main languages spoken in the nation.

The above statistics clearly reveal that television offers number of opportunities to promote lifelong learning among masses in India. The following strategies may be adopted to utilize the immense potential of television for lifelong learning in India.

- People in India love to watch soap operas. This tendency of Indian viewers may be exploited for the cause of lifelong learning. The program producers for television may be requested to especially portray workers and adult learners in their soap operas and show the importance of lifelong learning in their life.
- The teleconferencing mode of television may also be utilized to provide information and counseling about lifelong learning. The television channels may also invite lifelong learning experts to answer about lifelong opportunities to masses in India.
- Now-a-days reality shows on television in India are very popular. These shows have been used to encourage and excel people in different walks of life. Considering this success, reality shows for lifelong learning practitioners' and workers may also be organized. These shows will motivate people to indulge in lifelong learning activities for benefit of society and economy.

(D) Mobile Telephony

Talking about role of mobile phones in the non-formal and informal context among rural women from resource poor communities, Balasubramanian et al. (2010) suggest that the transition from powerlessness to empowerment is possible in non-formal learning settings and low-cost technologies offer means to accelerate this process in the context of social capital.

Mobile telephony is one of the most used communication means in media. The Indian Mobile subscriber base has increased in size by a factor of more than one-hundred since 2001 when the number of subscribers in the country was approximately 5 million to 635.51 Million in June 2010 (TRAI 2010). Agarwal (2005) observes that phone networks, including cellular phones, leading to "silent" communication revolution enabling millions to overcome the literacy barrier in communication. Companies and organizations are using mobile signals to endorse their products, services and messages.

Considering these observations, following strategies may be adopted to use mobile phones to promote lifelong learning in India.

- Mobile in India has been frequently used for Short Messaging Service (SMS) and Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS). These messages are also available in national and regional languages. The government agencies, educational institutions, and other related agencies

may send 'lifelong learning opportunities messages' to mobile users with a request to spread these messages to potential lifelong learners.

- Mobile companies offer the facility of mobile alerts to their customers. Under this facility, companies alert their customers about e-mails, latest events and other required information as per the need of the customers. The lifelong learning providers may use this feature to provide regular information about lifelong learning and training opportunities to learners.

(E) Internet and Computer Networks

The researches world over shows that internet has immense potential and is one of the best medium to spread lifelong learning. Jullien & Branchet (2010) noted that the Internet is a significant source of an increasingly diverse body of knowledge, a sort of "one-stop shopping paradise" for those seeking to learn: theoretical knowledge like foreign language or music theory or practical, hands-on skills. A few examples might include someone seeking guidance concerning a cooking recipe, an individual attempting to solve a technical problem related to his personal computer or someone needing to repair his washing machine.

Overall, 71 million users accessed Internet in India in year 2009, with 52 Million "active" users who accessed it at least once in a month. Small towns contributed to only 5% of internet usage in year 2000, which over a period of 9 years has grown to healthy 36% and for the first time has overtaken the Internet usage in Urban areas (Prabhudesai 2010).

Considering the reach and popularity of Internet in India, following strategies may be implemented to use internet and computer networks for lifelong learning in India.

- The apex agencies involved with lifelong learning in India may launch 'Lifelong Learning Portal' in national and regional languages. This portal may be used to provide different kind of information related to lifelong learning and lifelong learners.
- Agencies may also use Internet to offer on line lifelong learning program/training mainly focusing to equip learners for new skills and demands of labour market. The agencies will be required to regularly review and update these programs according to the need and demands of learners.
- The use of internet will also provide number of opportunities to lifelong learners to share their expertise, wishes, concerns and demands about lifelong learning by using e-mails, chat and blogs. This exchange of views will empower learners to practice lifelong learning via cooperative and active learning.

CONCLUSION

The global knowledge economy is transforming the demands of the labor market throughout the world. It is also placing new demands on citizens, who need more skills and knowledge to be able to function in their day-to-day lives. Equipping people to deal with these demands requires a new model of education and training. The researcher has a belief that adoption of proposed strategies to use 'ODL technologies for lifelong learning' will be helpful to meet out the unmet lifelong learning needs of Indian citizen in best possible way.

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