FACILITATING SELF-DIRECTED AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES FOR ADULT DISTANCE LEARNERS IN BANGLADESH

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Introduction

In a developing country like Bangladesh, adult distance education is considered as an important means to 'make the most' of the limited resources to cope with the increasing demand and necessity for higher education. To open up educational opportunities through distance learning the country has established an open university named Bangladesh Open University (BOU) in 1992 by the Act of the parliament.

Since its establishment BOU has been trying to develop and offer courses through self-instructional print materials which are backed up by limited radio and television broadcast programs and face to face tutorial sessions.

As a whole, the BOU model of distance education course development and delivery can be fairly described in Otto Peter's words—"the industrialized form of education" in which the course materials mostly follow the behaviorist principles such as, reductionism, hierarchy, structure, and standardization.

From the institution's perspective preparing such highly structured and standardized course materials is necessary for mass production of these pre-designed learning materials to achieve the 'economy of scale'. However the problem with such tightly structured 'industrialized' form of distance education is its inability to respond to individual learner needs. It was felt that the standardized course materials, which are often based upon expert knowledge rather than needs analysis, do not suit to the needs of every individual learner. As the delivery system in BOU model is mainly characterized by one-way asynchronous communications through print and radio and television broadcasts, it, in fact, limits the opportunities for learner-teacher and learner-learner interactions and reduces the traditional educational 'triangle' formed by teachers, curriculum, and students to a "mere line between curriculum and students" (Vennemann, 1991).

It is also remarkable that face to face human contact is an integral part of BOU distance education system for learner support and feedback. In the tutorial sessions groups of distance learners meet a tutor, who is usually a teacher of a traditional educational institution and not a writer of that distance course, to discuss their problems through learner-tutor and learner-learner interactions.

With very limited options for information and communications technologies due to a lack of institutional access and student affordability, the challenge for BOU is how to develop, deliver, and organize distance education programs with sufficient flexibility, support, and interaction for individual learners. One potential solution to this problem might be promoting and supporting self-directed and collaborative learning strategies for the distance learners so that the learners can plan, organize, execute, and evaluate their own learning collaboratively with the support and facilitation from the distance education institution, other learners, and learning environment.

This paper, which is based upon an independent research done at the Commonwealth of Learning, aims to identify the existing and potential self-directed and collaborative learning strategies for the adult distance learners in Bangladesh and to develop a conceptual framework for supporting and facilitating such strategies by the distance education institution.

Problem and hypotheses for the study

This research will consider the distance education program structures and institutional constraints to learner support and interactions and investigate how self-directed and collaborative learning strategies for the adult distance learners can be facilitated and supported by the institution.

As theoretical framework, this study recognizes the assumption that human capability of learning is at the center of all teaching and learning process. The distance learner learns not only from a single agent such as the teacher or providing institution, but the learner also learns from a myriad of sources such as, family, peers, various social institutions, and environment. Recognition and use of these learning sources as part of the open and distance learning system may play an important role in self-directed and collaborative learning for the adult distance learners.

Based upon this assumption of adult distance education as a multi-provider and multi-dimensional system, a number of hypotheses can be drawn for facilitating and supporting self-directed and collaborative learning strategies for the adult distance learners, especially those who have inadequate access to information and communications technology. For the purpose of this study it was assumed that the following strategies would facilitate and support self-directed and collaborative learning for the adult distance learners in Bangladesh:

1. Redesigning the instructional approach from a structured-didactic-behaviorist approach to a flexible-experiential-constructivist approach sufficiently incorporating real life problems, cases, and projects would encourage learners to recognize, compare, and construct their own learning through sharing and collaboration with other learners.
2. Training learners to acquire necessary skills for self-directed and collaborative learning and equipping them with appropriate test instruments to determine their psychic types, developmental stages, and learning styles would help them to assess their needs, plan their learning goals, identify necessary resources for learning, execute their plan, achieve results, and evaluate their learning.
3. A balance or 'match' between structure and flexibility in instructional designing and learner-autonomy and tutor-control in learner support strategies based upon individual psychic type, developmental stage, and learning style would help learners to achieve learning goals in their own ways.
4. Training and supporting learners to form self-directed study groups/circles and to have frequent interactions among them would facilitate self-directed and collaborative learning and compensate the lack of two-way communications and interactions in the BOU distance education delivery system.
5. Increasing the use of two-way interactive information and communications technologies both in synchronous (such as telephone conference, video-conference, web-chat and so on) and asynchronous (such as email, listservs, hyper-news, and so on) forms will promote learner-contents, learner-learner, learner-tutor, and learner-environment interactions and thus it will facilitate self-directed and collaborative learning.

Study objectives and methodology

The study aimed to:

- define the concepts of self-directed and collaborative learning and consider their applicability to the context of BOU
- explore the epistemology and theories behind self-directed and collaborative learning and investigate their compatibility with the theories of adult learning and distance education
- identify and evaluate through personal observation, experience, and interview with BOU staff and learners the self-directed and collaborative learning strategies generally employed by the adult distance learners of BOU
- identify and judge from related literature, similar research, case studies, and expert opinions the self-directed and collaborative learning strategies adopted by the adult learners in general and examine their relevance and applicability to BOU context
- study and analyze the same hypotheses, variables, and results in different studies already done and draw conclusions from their analysis as a whole.

It can be noticed that this study is mainly a qualitative one, which employed related literature survey and meta-analysis; personal observation, experience, and insight; limited interview with BOU staff and learners; and expert opinion and discussions on the subject.

Some of the hypotheses drawn for this study have already been tested in some studies and it is quite possible to test empirically the applicability of these hypotheses. However, due to lack of time and resources such empirical design was beyond the scope of this present study.

Related terms and definitions

In this study the term 'adult distance learners' combines two concepts—adult learners and distance learners. For ‘adult learner’, we take the definition provided by Arthur Chickering, from the National Commission on Higher Education and the Adult Learner, which defines "Adult Learner" as an individual whose major role in life is something other than a full-time student (http://www-ed.fnal.gov/linc/fall95/inservice/adult_chara.html).

Until recent years most authors viewed distance education as a form of education in which there is a spatial and temporal separation of teachers and learners. While this view is still technically applicable to the distance learners, this study takes an alternative view to this notion by seeing distance education “as a multi-dimensional system of communication and production” in which distance learners are “partners in pair-relationships” between the distance learner and the ‘helping organization’, between the distance learner and society, and between the ‘helping organization and society (Delling, 1991).

Finally by 'self-directed and collaborative learning strategies', this study means the strategies that are employed or can be employed by the adult distance learners to plan, conduct, and evaluate their learning with the help of the ‘helping organization’ (the distance education institution) and in collaboration with other learners and the learning environment.

Strategies for facilitating self-directed adult distance learning

It is always difficult to put all the desirable educational goals into practice, especially in a large-scale distance education institution. In general the problems for implementing the adult distance learning model in Bangladesh are:

a) the predominance of the objectivist-behaviorist culture in the academic community, which influences the attitude of the program planners, course developers, tutors as well as the learners;

b) the standardized large-scale production system of BOU, which limits the flexibility of the courses and make it difficult to change the contents to suit to the individual situations;

c) the instructional designing approach of BOU course development, which is highly influenced by the behaviorist principles;

d) lack of collaborative interaction between the learners and other learning resources in the community;

e) lack of necessary skills and ‘self-directed learner readiness’ by the adult learners to plan and implement self-directed and collaborative learning for themselves;

f) the apparent ‘control’ and rigid structure of BOU distance learning courses and the role of the tutor more as an ‘instructor’ than as a ‘facilitator’; and

g) lack of access to the necessary information and communication technologies for the adult distance learners

While the change of overall culture and institutional structures is a slow process, the University can undertake some initiatives to deal with the later issues. Such changes can be initiated by the following strategies as mentioned in the hypotheses.

Redesigning instructions for adult distance learning

In a large-scale distance education institution, which dominantly follow the systems approach, the dominant approach to distance education course design is rooted in a behaviorist conception of learning

and is characterized by a high degree of structure in which students are led through a predetermined sequence of learning activities (Evans and Nation, 1987).

However, critics of both behaviorist approach and the systems approach claim that "this approach limits learner choice and self-directedness, and thus creates passive learners who rarely venture beyond the prescribed course materials and learning activities" (Brookfield, 1982; Farnes, 1976; Harris, 1976).

As an alternative, some authors suggest that applying andragogy as espoused by Knowles (1975) to distance education course design will allow adults to make more decisions about their learning and this will encourage them to become self-directed and independent learners (Burge, 1988; Fales and Burge, 1984; Hough, 1984; Taylor and Kaye, 1986).

It can be argued that the empirical evidence for the validity of an 'andragogical approach' is not very conclusive in adult distance learning and also this approach is apparently 'incompatible' with a large-scale distance educational enterprise operating according to an industrial model (Bullen, 1997). However, we can address the issue from a different perspective.

For this alternative perspective, first we will analyze the existing implied 'theory of text' in distance education. Then we will offer the 'reader response theory' to explain the role of the text in adult distance learning and to see how the roles of the learner, the helping institution, and society can be integrated by designing the distance education courses for the adult learners in another way.

The behaviorist approach as well as the view that 'text teaches in distance education' are held together by an implicit 'modernist' theory of text which believes in the mediating role of the text between 'author/teacher' and 'reader/student'. As Marsden (1996) puts it,

> This theory of text has the following components: First, the natural form of a text is in writing. Writing/reading is analogous to speaking/listening. Readers 'listen' to a text as it 'speaks' to them. Second, the purpose of the text is to communicate the meaning of the writer to the reader. The text has a single, correct meaning, which is a function of the intentions, motives and context of the writer. Third, the writer has more authority over the text than the reader. The author is a privileged arbiter of the text's meaning. The reader is responsible for deciphering the text's meaning by reconstructing the intentions, motives and context of the writer. Fourth, the relationship between writer and reader is a relationship between an active subject and a passive object. The role of the writer is to educate, instruct or entertain. The role of the reader is to be educated, instructed or entertained (229-230).

The obectivist belief that there is only one 'correct' meaning of the text creates tension, uncertainty and potential 'misreading' of the text by the distance learner, which is termed by Moore (1990) as 'transactional distance'. This writer/teacher centered and role-bound approach to text also creates tension in the writer of the text, who tries hard to convey his/her own meaning to the reader in a most clear and unambiguous way. As a result we get a 'closed text' in distance education, which has only one meaning and in which the reader has very little scope to construct his/her own meaning through self-discovery, critical reflection, sharing and collaboration.

Opposed to this 'modernist' theory of text, we can cite the 'reader response theory'. There is a range of theories on text and construction of meaning including this modernist theory of text. Chandler (1994) puts these theories in a continuum of two extreme positions respectively, those of determinate meaning and completely 'open' interpretation. Thus he gets three sets of notions on text and meaning:

- Objectivist: Meaning entirely in text ('transmitted');
- Constructivist: Meaning in interplay between text and reader ('negotiated');
- Subjectivist: Meaning entirely in its interpretation by readers ('re-created').

The modernist theory of text in distance education fall within the 'objectivist' or 'formalist' orientation in this continuum. As we move towards the other pole the model, communication becomes more of a process of 'negotiation' or 'construction' (variously referred to as a 'constructionist', 'constructivist', 'social-interactive' or 'dialogical' model). In formalist theories meaning resides in *texts* ; in dialogical theories meaning is a *process* of negotiation between writers and readers (Holquist 1983).

Although the theories of text and reader response have been emerged from the field of literary criticism, they have some implications for text and course design in adult distance learning also. In practice we may have all three types of texts described in the continuum. The highly scientific writing or discourses can be 'closed' or objectivist in which there is only one meaning intended by the writer. The educational texts can be 'semi-open' or constructivist, in which the meaning is a shared process between the writer and the reader. And the poetry and abstract creative writing can be 'open' or subjectivist, in which the meaning (if any) primarily depends on the response of the reader.

However, in terms of underlying epistemology and theory of learning, the 'dialogic' or constructivist theory of construction of meaning closely matches with our 'multi-dimensional' and 'constructivist' notion of adult distance learning. But the question is how we can develop such constructivist texts for adult distance learning.

At this point the authors such as Taylor and Kaye (1986), Farnes (1976) and Hiemstra and Brockett (1994) have provided some workable suggestions. However, in brief we can recommend the following points:

- Using both formal and non-formal objectives to help the learner construct a learning contract for himself/herself based upon his/her purpose or problem in real life;
- Using attitudinal test instruments to help learners identify and reflect on their prior knowledge, understanding and beliefs on that subject;
- Helping the learners to identify and evaluate possible learning resources in the community through activities involving self-exploration, brain-storming and problem solving;
- Developing and incorporating tools to help learners to identify their learning style, psychic type, and developmental stage and choose a convenient learning strategy for themselves;
- Using extensively cases, projects and real life situations to encourage the learners to compare and critically reflect on their own situations;
- Presenting issues to be addressed by the learners rather than questions to be answered
- Presenting responses of several learners and then commenting on them critically rather than only providing the answer key or the feedback
- Constructing and incorporating the activities that promote formation of self-directed learning group, comparison, sharing and collaboration;
- Rebuilding the assessment and evaluation criteria from a product approach (such as the demonstration of knowledge, skills, etc.) to a process approach (such as depth and extent of self-exploration, comparison, critical reflection, evaluation and decision making).

Self-directed and collaborative learning groups

Most distance education literature mentions of three levels of interaction in distance education-- the interaction between teacher and learner, the interaction between learner and contents, and the interaction between learner and other learners (Moore, 1988).

However, another level of interaction, that is, the interaction between the learner and society is also crucial to the effectiveness of learning. In this level of interaction learners identifies and make uses of other learning resources and construct and transfer their learning in real situations.

In fact, there is always some distance in the conventional education system between the learners and their home, workplace and community. The evolution of 'distance' in education from home, workplace, community, and teaching organization is a historical process corresponding to social, cultural and technological changes in a society.

In earliest form of home-based education, home, community, workplace, and the teaching institution were pretty close, as the home was mainly the place for work and learning. However, with the emergence of school, a distance was created between the learner and his/her home, community and workplace, which is again reduced in distance education, although a distance between learner and the

teaching institution has been created there. But in the latest development of computer and web-based delivery of courses and the emerging learning community approach to education through a global many to many communications, the distance between the learner and his/her home, community, workplace, and helping institution has been virtually reduced.

Based upon this understanding of 'distance' in education, we can encourage the learners to make best use of the multiple learning sources from home, workplace, community and helping institution by forming some self-directed and collaborative learning groups. Such learning groups can be initially organized and supported by the University and the tutors as part of the learning curriculum. Also the learners will need some skills training to be an effective self-directed and collaborative learners.

Self-directed learner readiness

Self-Directed Learner Readiness (SDLR) is a scale to measure to what extent a learner is ready to plan and implement self-directed learning. Usually such measurement involves of complex sets of individual (psychic type, learning style) and situational (community learning resources, culture etc.) variables.

We can improve the self-directed learner readiness by providing some training to the learners for the necessary skills of setting objectives, planning a learning project, implementing the plan, evaluating the result and collaborating with other learners. This training can be incorporated with the adult distance learning courses through some components on study skills for self-directed and collaborative learning.

Also self-directed learner readiness applies to the readiness of the helping organization and the readiness of the community to support self-directed and collaborative learning. This community may be both an interest or topic based virtual community (like in a listserv) and a peer based physical community. Some informal awareness building program may also help improving the readiness of the organizations and the community.

Autonomy vs. Control in Self-Directed Learning

In conventional face to face education, the institution or the teacher controls both objectives and means of education, whereas self-directed learning occur when the learner controls both of them (Mocker and Spear, 1982). Mocker and Spear presents this model in a two-by-two matrix of learner and institution. Situations that occupy the other two cells of the matrix are: non-formal learning, in which the learner controls the objectives and the institution controls the means; and informal learning, in which institution controls the objectives but the learner controls the means of learning.

However, in practice the process is more like a continuum than like a matrix. In adult distance learning, we can find all these four situations, in which the learner as well as the institution controls one or both of these components of objectives and means.

Anyway, there is no clear evidence to believe that all adult distance learners will prefer autonomy and flexibility. Some learners may prefer more control and structure depending on their self-directed learner readiness. The role of the institution is to offer a range of support and facilitation mechanism through course designing and support service to suit individual learning style and purpose of the learner.

Information and communication technologies for adult distance learning

With the emergence of "information super highway" through 'digital' and newer information and communication technologies, the dominant industrial model (Peters, 1989) of distance education organization is now about to break and a 'post-industrial' model of distance and distributed learning has been evolved. Any single person, with the help of a computer and the Internet is now able to develop and offer distance education courses through Internet from any part of the world. Learners also have access to the course as well as to the tutor online from anywhere and at any time. There are also increasing number of topic-based or special interest based online community involved in many to many asynchronous communications.

This online course design and delivery does not necessarily follow an industrial model as the online courses may be developed for a limited number of students and they can be changed anytime by the developer to suit to the learner needs and context.

The world is now moving towards technical readiness for a global learning community approach to education, in which ideally everybody will have access to information and communication technologies and everybody will learn from each other through online interactions and collaboration, no matter what geographic region or in what time zone they are in.

In this changed scenario, it is extremely important for the BOU to rethink its media and technology options for adult distance learning. Interestingly the University is now using more expensive technologies such as radio and TV broadcast than the computer enhanced options due to a lack of infra-structural support and student access to computer and Internet.

But the situation is changing and will change very rapidly in the next few years, as ICT is becoming a major sector of growth in Bangladesh. So the University has to think for the increasing use of computer mediated communications options for promotion of institution-learner, learner-contents, learner-learners, and learner-society interactions.

So with the help of the skills training, self-directed study groups and information and communications technologies, we can put the 'constructivist' text of distance education into practice.

Conclusion

The present economic era has been termed as a 'knowledge-intensive economy', in which adult distance learning has increasing importance. However, Bangladesh is still struggling with its labor-intensive economy and most of the adults of this country are illiterate and unskilled laborers. So adult distance learning has immensely important role to play for the human resources as well as overall development of the country.

This study has identified the potential strategies BOU can undertake to facilitate self-directed and collaborative learning strategies for the benefit of the adult distance learners in Bangladesh. It was found that designing and developing 'semi-open', 'constructivist' text for adult distance learning courses is very important in putting the theoretical understanding of adult distance learning into practice. Along with this, organizing and supporting self-directed and collaborative learning groups, training the learner to develop the essential learning skills, adopting an approach of a balance between institutional control and learner autonomy based upon self-directed learner readiness, and increasing the use of information and communication technologies for the promotion of various levels of interactions will help the learners to be effective self-directed and collaborative learners.

However, the model and hypotheses proposed in this study were not empirically tested. Further experiment and study in this area may focus on more detailed findings.

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