

STATUS OF FACE-TO-FACE INSTRUCTION IN DISTANCE EDUCATION AT AIOU

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ABSTRACT

Face-to-face contact is one of the strategies used in the teaching learning process in distance education. It is a means of alleviating the problems of isolationism, which the distance learner faces. Apart from serving to supplement or complement teaching, face-to-face contact bring together both the learner and the teacher to interact socially.

In this paper, the status of face-to-face instruction in distance education is highlighted. Conditions under which it may be effective and made to contribute towards the goals of distance education are examined; finally, suggestions are given as to the future direction of face-to-face instruction as a component of distance education.

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

Distance learning, distance education and distance teaching are terms generally used interchangeably. Distance learning is an alternative method of providing education for adult learners on a non-resident basis. Individualized instruction is carried out through correspondence system. Learning in this respect may be wholly through print in form of carefully written instructional material, such as study guides, textbooks, handouts and the like. These may be supplemented with other media such as radio, television, video cassettes, computers, audio cassettes, records, and so on. The distance learner carries out some written assignments which are mailed to the teacher for marking and correction, because of his physical separation from the tutor, the distance learner has a number of problems which often militate against effective learning.

The situation has been described as 'the isolation syndrome (Ljosa, 1975, p.251). Among these problems are: lack of access to libraries because of the remoteness of the learners environment; lack of physical access to the teacher for personal discussions; the student's home conditions may not be very suitable for effective learning: The work and domestic demands may not favor effective learning; the postal system may not be reliable enough for effective correspondence between the teacher and learner; and most of the resources that may facilitate meaningful learning may not be available to the learner. Therefore, the face-to-face medium is often adopted to reinforce distance education channels in order to ease these problems.

Face-to-face contact involves formal meeting of teachers and learners for the purpose of instruction. It may involve the following: The formal talk and chalk lecture type; formal class attendance to adopt correspondence materials for remedial purpose; tutorials sessions; self-help group's i.e. Small groups without a teacher; meeting for laboratory or practical work and the telephone and telephone conferencing (Sparkes 1982, pp.251-66). In such face-to-face sessions, audio-visual media can also be used to supplement or aid teaching.

The intensity of use of the face-to-face strategy varies with institutions and with subjects. Some institutions use face-to-face contact teaching to supplement their teaching while others use it to complement teaching. In institutions where it is used to supplement teaching, little or no new topics are taught. The sessions are in such cases used for remedial, counseling, or practical work, and for seminar classes to explain further the lessons already taught using other distance education strategies, such sessions are held for a very short time, say one week, or at weekends and evening, in some other distance teaching institutions, the face-to-face session extends over a period of four weeks or more depending on the nature of the subjects being offered particularly in teaching practice of master level courses. (Rashid, M. 1985).

Some distance education programmes are designed in such a way that attendance at face-to-face sessions are obligatory, while in others, it is voluntary, for instance, attendance at face-to-face teaching is obligatory in all the master courses workshops and certain others for the obligatory, face-to-face teaching is often used to complement correspondence teaching, as is the case of Allama Iqbal Open University whose contact session runs for about 18 weeks at a stretch in each semester.

SUBJECTS REQUIRING FACE-TO-FACE TEACHING

In distance education, however, the indirect interaction is subject to the attainment of the learning goals by using means to an end (Yadav, 2002, p.45). While some courses can be delivered through distance education strategies, others such as professional, technological and science subjects are more effectively taught by face-to-face contact. For instance, Horlock (1982, pp.252-3) argues that the conventional crafts will generally have to be taught locally, primarily on a face-to-face basis or through a mixture of face to-face and distance study, Holmberg (1982) also feels that for some kinds of learning (surgery, for instance), non-contiguous communication alone is not enough. The value of supplementing distance study by residential course is evident in such cases.

Clennell, S. Peters et, al. (1995, p.81) also supports the combination of face-to-face teaching with distance learning systems, particularly in service teacher training programme because it is dictated by the nature of many of the competencies with which the teacher/trainees should be provided.

Teacher/trainee, for example, are expected to put the theory they learn in assignments into practice in the classroom, and to give practical demonstration of the desired performance skills. The absence of face-to-face teaching may defeat the main purpose of the in-service teacher education programme.

In structuring course content for face-to-face and distance teaching, some basic principles need to be carefully considered. First, the characteristics of the clientele need to be taken into consideration. For example, we need to know the age and educational background of the learner. Secondly, we need to assess the difficulty level of the course contents. Thirdly, it is imperative that we should consider the issue of availability and suitability of physical facilities to be used during the face-to-face session. All these are necessary, so that far reaching decisions can be taken on which of the course contents are more appropriately taught by correspondence, and which by face-to-face session, this implies that only contents that can easily be comprehended by the learner should be taught by correspondence. It is also important that the contents are such as can be covered successfully within the correspondence period. There is therefore, a need to effect a balance on course contents and duration between face-to-face and correspondence parts.

Where this is the case, attendance is made mandatory for all students because what is taught in the contact will not be repeated in correspondence lessons. The demand of the course syllabuses and the complexity of the courses contents will have to be taken into account in maintaining such a balance. The need for balancing is relevant to the area of evaluation. In general, evaluation weighting is related to the depth and quantity of contents covered as well as the time spent on them. Certification is normally based on correspondence work and the face-to-face work, among other things, correspondence work could be assessed either through the correspondence assignments, in which case they form part of the continuous assessment, or as part of the examination that usually comes at the end of the fact-to-face-session. The first method could be used where the supply of study guides and the submission of students' written assignments were regular. But where these aspects are irregular, the only option left is to employ the second method.

STAFFING AND QUALITY CONTROL

Another aspect of the face-to-face session of a distance learning programme is the issue of staffing. From the session to be successfully run, there is need for experienced and qualified teachers who are specialists in their own fields to be recruited. This may not pose a problem for a distance learning programme mounted by an institution of higher learning. This is because the regular staff can constitute the pool from which face-to-face instructors are recruited. Care must be taken to ensure that the session is neither over-staffed nor under-staffed. Either situation could have an adverse effect on the efficiency of the administration of the face-to-face session which affords the learners the singular opportunity of finding solutions to most of their problems, which they would not have been able to solve in their various stations.

At Allama Iqbal Open University, to solve the problem of trained tutors, registration of tutors was done and 32,000 tutors were registered by the end of 2006. During 2006-07 more than 20,000/- tutors were appointed by Allama Iqbal Open University in their respective disciplines to teach students and provide support for learning the contents included in a course and acquire lab or manipulate skills where specified. (AIU, 2007, p.59).

Sharma (2006, p,93) says that "the teacher must understand each and every student, and unlike a classroom teacher who addresses the abstract average student to his class, the distance teacher (tutors) has to address every student individually. And the only way of addressing his students is to write comments on the answer scripts".

In spite of the need to recruit only highly qualified and experienced teachers, orientation courses for tutors should precede a contact session. This is necessary because it is one thing to have well qualified and experienced teachers, but another to ensure that they are properly prepared for the course for which they are recruited. Constant supervision is a must. This is generally the responsibility of the heads of departments in the programme. Effective supervision ensures punctuality at classes and quality of teaching. It should be remembered that a face-to-face session of long duration, can usually be effectively run during the long vacations But ironically this is the time, when the academicians are fatigued already, having been teaching for the preceding full semester. The situation can be further worsened by instructions being involved in the marking of examination scripts for some examining bodies, such as examination department of Allama Iqbal Open University where the academicians developed examination's paper along with their responsibilities of developing instructional materials and delivering lectures. Combining such an additional task with teaching during a contact session can greatly affect the quality of work. Those so involved should as much as possible be excluded from participation in the face-to-face programme.

A face-to-face session is usually crowded with learning activities and if care is not taken learners may be left without benefit from sessions and follow-up activities, such a situation must be avoided through careful planning of instructional programmes. The smooth running of the session lies on efficient organization, the complexity of which depends on the duration of the session and the number of students and staff involved. No doubt, the organization of a face-to-face session of long duration will be more complex and involving than that of short duration. Also the greater number of students and staff to cater for, the more complex the organization of the face-to-face session. Where the distance learning institution relies heavily on the use of physical facilities of other institution, the organization will not be an easy one because of protracted negotiations for the use of the facilities. A typical example here is the Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad which relies very much on the use of facilities of sister institutions particularly in F.Sc, B.Sc and M.Sc courses.

In institutions where it is not compulsory for students to attend face-to-face sessions, attendance is often poor even in some courses where attendance is mandatory, drop-out rate tends to be high because of the inability of some students to attend, generally because of financial resources, demands of place of work, or for some other reasons (Wedell, 1970, p. 66, Scupham, 1975, Carr, 1984). On the whole, organization, has been found to be laborious and financially expensive, this has increased the cost of running a distance education programme, it has also made more attractive, cost wise, the running of short duration face-to-face sessions (Perraton, 1979, p.40, Rumble, 1982).

In organizing a face-to-face session, the welfare of staff and students needs to be properly taken care of, irrespective of the duration of the session, this includes feeding/accommodation for students. And provision of appropriate learning facilities for both tutors and students. It is important to stress that logistic arrangements as well as the recruitment of teachers for a contact session must be completed long before the commencement of the session.

EVALUATION OF PAST AND PRESENT FACE-TO-FACE COMPONENT IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

A lot has been said about the need for face –to-face component in distance education. Some studies have been carried out by eminent scholars to find out the extent of successor failure of the technique. Rashid, M (1985, p.108) carried out an evaluation study of the study centers of AIOU of South Punjab areas. He found that about 24.5% of the students lived alone in areas where there were no other AIOU students doing the same courses, he also came up with the finding that face-to-face meetings were inevitable for science students who used the laboratories as part of their courses requirement. The face-to-face component has been found by students to be very useful in the course of their learning. It is also found that study centers located in institutions of the same academic status as the distance education institutions perform fairly more satisfactorily than others. Thus, university-based centres were regarded as ideal, particularly for university-level courses.

For tutors in study centres to perform efficiently, most scholars in distance education have seen the need for training them, no matter how qualified they may be in their own fields. Such training in distance education will equip the tutors with the skills much needed in discharging their responsibilities.

Even when the tutors are qualified and well trained in distance education there is need for supervision of the study centers by the academic staff of the institution. Such visits will afford them the opportunity to assess the progress being made at the centers, and will also enhance the morale of the students.

Face-to-face components with short duration have been described by some students, as having less positive effect on learning than those of longer duration. A 10 week contact session may save students the problem of having to travel to study centers fortnightly.

The face-to-face component has been found to remove one of the cogent objections to correspondence education. That objection is that correspondence education deprives the student and the teacher of an essential ingredient of learning process. Namely, the lively interaction between the student and the teacher (Wedell, 1970, p.60). In order to promote a social interaction among students, some institutions such as the UK Open University, encourage the formation of student association (Wheeler, 1985, pp.19-22). The organization of study centers, and study groups also contribute to reducing student isolation while learning at a distance. In a study by McIntosh (1975, p.42), it was found that about 50% of the students thought that contacts with other students and staff were a very important feature of summer face-to-face sessions. Charnley, et al (1981, p.21) found out that about 63% of students in a study considered the face-to-face component to be very helpful. Wangdahl¹⁴⁶ (1970) also reported a widespread belief that group contact could play humanizing, motivating and instructional role in a distance education system.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

What seems to be almost neglected in some face-to-face sessions has been clearly revealed in some studies. Rashid, M. (1998, p.22) pointed out the need for an orientation programme for teachers on techniques of teaching adults. The face-to-face sessions should not be crowded with too many learning activities, as this may lower the morale of students and it can even lead to high crop-out rates among students.

It has been found that a long vacation face-to-face contact is preferable to and more economical to the students than, face-to-face contact of short duration spread over the year. This is because of generally poor communication systems in some countries, especially the third World Countries. All students are relieved of the necessity to travel enormous distances to study centers every fortnight, with the high risk involved (IGNOU, 1995, p.36). Supervision during face-to-face session has been found to be grossly inadequate in some study centers. This aspect should be given great attention if the objectives of face-to-face component are to be achieved.

Distance education programmes would find study centers necessary and useful as such programmes expand in terms of the student's population. For instance, the Allama Iqbal Open University because of the increasing number of its students now holds its contact session, at 960 study centers under 86 Regional Offices and Coordinating offices., (Vice Chancellor Annual Report, 2007, p.56).

The geographical spread and the number of students in each location could dictate the need for decentralization and the creation of centers for face-to-face instruction. This is particularly important if the students come for a relatively large geographical area.

This will minimize cost and inconveniences of having to travel long distance to attend courses on the part of the students. This is particularly relevant to the Allama Iqbal Open University whose student's enrolment coverage is the whole country.

In programmes with practical attachments which require field supervision, such as teaching practice, supervision trips could be used to serve some of the purpose of face-to-face session. If for noting else, the period could be used for offering counseling services to students.

For instance, in the Allama Iqbal Open University education programme, use is made of this opportunity not only for distribution of study material to students, but also for counseling, that is, in addition to the primary purpose of such trips.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, there is no doubt that study centers will play an increasing role in face-to-face programmes as time goes on. The increasing number of the clientele and the geographical converge of such programmes will make the creation of such centers more imperative in future.

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