

Augmenting Learning Space in Post Graduate Courses in Literature Studies Through ODeL: A Critical Overview of NSOU Learning Praxis

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Abstract

Literature studies at an advanced level require open space for dialectical deliberations, which alone can provide benchmark quality assurance; but its horizontal expanse must perforce factor the vertical depth of the discipline with specific learning objectives. The analytics of learner responses while conducting Post-Graduate literature programmes fruitfully within the domain of ODL posits blended learning - a conjunction of direct interaction and ODL praxis, as a pre-requisite. This paper is premised on the proven results of an experiment at augmenting learner super structured upon the existing SIM's and exhaustive Personal Contact Programmes (PCP), by means of basic ODeL, through ICT enabled social networking support services adopted by Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU). The support is aimed for more than 8,000 learners of Post Graduate English(PGEG) and Post Graduate Bengali(PGBG) courses, enrolled in various Study Centres located far and wide from the University Headquarters. In its search for enhanced learner support services with a view of constructive academic feedback, the School of Humanities experimentally added a module of direct e-interaction between faculty and learners of Post Graduate literature courses through platforms like Facebook and Google chat. This empirical paper shows how the learner has availed this service to resolve their curricular academic issues on weekdays during University working hours. Concerned faculty on their part have, by way of answering queries mainly evolving out of existing study materials provided to learners, been able to dynamically identify areas that require development. This paper carries the authorial conviction that ODeL is best seen as an extension of the classical pedagogy of ODL, wherein a graded system of blended learning can be the panacea to reach out to the heterogeneous learner community.

Keywords: *open and distance elearning, blended learning, literature studies, PG programme, curricula augmentation, student support service, PCP, online support*

Introduction

The experience of reading literature in curriculum-based domain is not at par with the experience of general reading of literary texts. When we enter into a discipline-based course structure of literary studies, we see reading and re-reading creates lots of shades in our mind. Particularly in higher level studies like Post Graduate work, learner becomes reader and literary reception happens actively. In this reception process, learners are in need of interactive space and learning process in which his/her self-understanding can be upgraded. In classroom teaching, we have mere lecture methods to create such polemic environment of learning process. But communications through different medium and sharing of differential interpretative arguments cannot be systematized in closed institutional domain of conventional mode of teaching; not only that, the learner at far geographical distance is unable to reach to that option of availing conventional mode of teaching.

Here ODL has gained its relevance; specially ICT-enabled virtual teaching and the creation of proper Self-Instructional Material (SIM) has shifted the paradigm of curricula based literary studies in higher learning arena.

In ODL system, we have tremendous advantages of open space of knowledge sharing. Even though the distant learners are loosely connected with the peers and experts of their own institutions, they have options of flexi learning support service. In literature studies, this kind of openness can generate creative knowledge, while they peruse their course effectively. Augmentation of curricula of literature studies can be seen in this way, where real openness of argument and interpretation could enrich literature teaching in higher level through ODeL. This paper discusses how Netaji Subhas Open University is augmenting its course curricula in Post Graduate level studies in different courses it offers.

Literature Review

In ODL system, the designing of course curricula is immensely important. It requires well-structured, well-designed curricula as many experts have mentioned so far. Designing of curricula in ODL system needs to be flexible and accommodative in nature because of the very nature and status of learner it caters to. Glennie (1996) argues for a learner centric approach to curriculum designing. Rumble (2000) has observed that the distance education institutions have been instrumental in the development of new arena of student support service which help the learner to perform well, while Anderson (2008) pointed out that the understanding of learners is the prerequisite component of an learner centric support service system. The specificity of learners knowledge, their cultural attributes and social milieu are the starting component of this system. We find an interesting note of Harasim (2000) that the ODL is no longer peripheral or supplementary, "it has become an integral part of mainstream society." While reviewing all these notes in ODL perspective of developed countries, we need to contextualise these views as per our settings and stipulations. While posing towards a study of literature curricula in ODeL, we have cited the article written by Anastasia Natasina who has done a comparative survey of literary education in nine European Universities (Natsina, 2007).

Overview

Background

Studying humanities is still an easy and worthy option for the learner in West Bengal. The state has a historical background of renaissance and development of educational pedagogy in its trajectory of modern age. From the very beginning of colonial rule, Calcutta as well as Bengal were the centre of culture and education. The development of modern Bengali language & Literature is also connected with the progress of western modernity unleashed by the British rule in India. In Bengal, largely; the acceptance of enlightenment, its joyful prosperity and the emergence of elite middle class constitutes the whole gamut of literature reading as simultaneous to learning English as a language and its glory of literature. In a sense, acquiring the knowledge of English language and skills shows social status and power one can dream of. Parallel to this observation, there is a huge space of Bengali speaking people who not only constitutes the major readership of Bengal, but largely of school education domain. After the formation of Bangladesh as a nation (in 1971), which precedes a historic movement for its mother tongue Bengali, the orientation of Bengali

psyche got sharp departure from colonial knowledge pedagogy. Learning spaces were created in Bengali from school education to higher education arena. Language teacher/trainer, especially in Bengali and English, are constantly being engaged to shape the whole gamut of education.

The demand of acquiring a degree in any of the traditional discipline is a factually known phenomenon of Bengal. After passing 12 standard examination, learners normally get enrolled in any of such courses. In humanities or social science subjects like Bengali, English, History, Political Science, it happens in a large number. This demand for academic degree from any of the higher education institute/university has many reasons most likely related to high rate of pass in primary and secondary levels. Historical as well as socio-political developments of Bengal may be considered in this discussion. The contention behind huge enrolment in language subjects definitely shows the social psyche in general.

Objective Reality

Since 2010, there has been 14 State funded open universities and 242 Dual Mode Universities/ Institutes in India who are practicing ODeL in their teaching learning process. They are working under the aegis of University Grant Commission. Indira Gandhi National Open University(IGNOU), the fastest growing mega university of the world, has already made history in inclusive education and ODeL on the whole. The share of Distance Education in Gross Enrolment Ratio(GER) of India is about 22-23% which is notable (University Grants Commission). Netaji Subhas Open university is the only Open University of West Bengal funded by the Govt of West Bengal as well as the Govt of India. Teaching learning pedagogy of ODeL is constantly being engaged in new explorations of teaching methodologies that are taking place in this country which corresponds to divergent cultural milieu of India.

West Bengal is a state which has high demands for higher education in general. The state, with an area of 88,752 square kilometers and population of 91.3 million (with density of 1000/Sq.KM). Literacy rate is 77.08% which is higher than the national rate of 74.04% (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, n.d.). The official language of the state is Bengali which has a close geographical proximity to another 168 million Bengali speaking people of Bangladesh. In West Bengal there are 18 Universities and 515 degree-granting colleges, aided by the Central or State government, which award higher education degrees. About 12,000 teachers are appointed in these institutions. In the school education scenario, there are 49,893 primary and 4,582 secondary or higher secondary schools which has covered the whole geographical area (Department of School Education, Government of West Bengal, n.d.). No doubt, this huge volume of state funded educational institutions is in practice of an effective and modern educational pedagogy. It also shows that a sizable corpus of learner in higher education as well as in primary and secondary education are included in the traditional mode of teaching.

In India, until 2015, the internet penetration was 18% on the whole; but it is increasing very fast. In 2013, 2014 and 2015 the penetration percentages were 15.1, 21 & 26%, respectively. While the total internet users of India is 37.5%, it is interesting to find that the active mobile internet users (30.3%) and active social media users(13.6%) are increasing very rapidly (Statista: The Statistics Portal). Data in 2011 shows that in West Bengal, the households having computer comprise 8.3% in which 2.2% is with internet connections (Biswas, 2012). However, things are changing rapidly. In 2015, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) published its Telecom Service Performance Indicator Report which indicated that the total internet subscriber per 100 population is 24.09, which included rural internet subscribers comprising 12.89 per 100 population. It also highlighted

that among the total count of internet subscribers of 302.35 million, the broadband subscribers were only 99 million (one third of the total count) who's majority lives in urban areas. (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India)

Social of Psyche

In the West Bengal, degree awarded by the Open and Distance Learning University is still not acceptable to many, in spite of a clear notification from the University Grant Commission (UGC), since 2013. Today, all the 13 OU of India are within the ambit of UGC, which is a statutory body to look after the accreditation of higher learning institutes/universities under the purview of Government of India. Traditional system of imparting education is so deeply rooted that without institutional absence or physical non-existence of Face-to-Face mode or physical absence of teacher is still not completely acceptable in the social psyche of the people. Most of the people engaged in educational domain in university level came from conventional education system. Their psyche are also involved in it. For the last two decades, after the establishment of National Open University (IGNOU), Open Educational System actually expanded in terms of inclusiveness. Quality in higher education has not attained such height that one learner can cherish upon. It was a forced attempt to reach the unreached. NSOU has also faced such unavoidable social psyche in its trajectories of a decade.

Now, while modern information technology has taken off a phenomenal growth in India, societies are changing, the educational paradigm and mindset are also changing. Open Universities are in the front of these changes. It innovates, customizes the educational methodology of teaching different disciplines of core subject area. Pedagogies of ODeL are interlinked with the basic knowledge it imparts to the learner. In the process of ODeL praxis, NSOU has evolved such blended model of curriculum based, purpose oriented studies in humanities subjects to overcome such psyche. The involvement of teachers of conventional system, institutions is important in this regard.

About NSOU

Netaji Subhas Open University is a premier State Open University of India, funded by the Government of West Bengal and the Government of India. The university, established through State Legislation Act (WB Act XiX) of 1997, was recognized by the UGC in 1997. It recorded a phenomenal growth in terms of learner enrolment in the last fifteen years. The university has 105 Study centres across the state covering geographical area of about 8000sq km, and more than 300,000 learners enrolled in different post graduate, under graduate and vocational courses. After the issuance of UGC notification in 2013 (University Grants Commission) regarding the equivalence of degree conferred by any State Open University of India with conventional university, the demand for NSOU has raised considerably. The other important aspect of NSOU lies in its forced attempt to expand higher education in suburban, rural and remote areas of Bengal through its study centres, which are actually degree-granting colleges of the conventional system. Mostly,

the basic infrastructure of these colleges is used on weekends for this purpose. So blending of two different educational endeavours has been enacted from the very beginning of NSOU.

Enrolment of Learners in NSOU

The enrolment trend of learners in post-graduate level is shown in the following chart.

Table 1. Enrolment at NSOU (2013-2015)

Year	2013 July		2014 July		2015 July	
Total enrolment in PG Level (in 11 subjects)	8,650		11,473		17,926	
Enrolment in Humanities subject (Bengali & English) (Two year course)	Bengali	English	Bengali	English	Bengali	English
	2519	880	3233	1219	5052	1948

It may be observed from Table 1 that the demand for these two subjects (Bengali and English) in post-graduate level is high, compared to any other subject. It is almost the one third of the total enrolment in PG level at NSOU. Compared to other conventional universities, PG Bengali and PG English enrolment are also quite high; though both degree programs are equitable in purpose as per UGC regulations are concerned. Following are the findings of data regarding the enrolment of Bengali and English in PG level of different conventional universities having only face to face mode of teaching:

Table 2. Number of annual enrollees for Bengali and English in PG level of different conventional universities

University	Number of Annual Enrollees for Bengali	Number of Annual Enrollees for English
University of Calcutta(CU)	363	250
Jadavpur University(JU)	110	50
Rabindra Bharati University(RBU)	160	
University of North Bengal (NBU)	80	
University of Gour Banga(UGB)	110	
Burdwan University (BU)	245	200
Vidyasagar University(VU)	475	145
Thakur Panchanan University, Coochbehar	70	

Total	not more than 1,500	not more than 800
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Methodology

This paper argues for a blended learning model that transpires from the general practice that has been offered by NSOU regarding Student Support Service (SSS) under the School of Humanities for Post Graduate(PG) Courses of English and Bengali. It is noteworthy that there are 15 government-sponsored universities in West Bengal where these two courses are offered; and out of these 15 universities, five have their statutory provision to run the Directorate of Distance Education (DDE). The curricula, offered by NSOU, are at par to all these conventional universities.

Quantitative analysis of learning analytics have been made to explore the additional inputs in teaching humanities subjects in regard to conventional mode of teaching. It's a known fact that the orientation of teaching, especially in language and literature disciplines, is non-linear. According to its multiplicity of approach in ODeL, the study of literature, in general, can evolve as an effective one. Blending of learning methods is therefore obvious. The experience of NSOU can be seen as an example of hybridized teaching-learning methods compared to conventional university system. Teacher-student contact and technology enhanced teaching pedagogy can be seen as an effective model of teaching humanities discipline. In this paper, the scenario of study of the humanities courses in West Bengal is contextualized, in which the praxis becomes demanding for a state-funded open university like NSOU.

Discussion

The blended learning model is always case specific and customized upon the educational environment and learning space. In Netaji Subhas Open University, we have seen a customized model of blended learning in PG level. The physical existence of counselor and facilitator are the important components here to impart effective teaching in literature studies. Here, we have also seen the juxtaposition of conventional university teaching model and in ODL as well. The learners 'psyche' to the reception of direct teaching is important here. We have noted that the learner enrolled in such courses are aspirant of higher degree and need to earn the eligibility for getting job in highly competitive market. The inclusion of remote area, backward caste, ethnicity and economically backward class are major factors behind such high enrollment in humanities courses which are essentially non-lab discipline of study. Therefore, learner entering into area of higher education through this state funded ODL institution, are in need of regular monitoring. Blended model of learning is relevant in this intervention. Innovative learning praxis developed by the NSOU especially in Post Graduate Literature studies under the School of Humanities, has taken the key role in augmentation process of curricula.

NSOU

The augmentation of PG curricula of Bengali and English is very important component to the learner enrolled in these courses. It shows that the academic standard of curricula is at par to any other conventional university, which promotes its accountability to the learner coming from different social milieu.

There are four major components of Student Support Service under ODeL and NSOU in general; which are i) Self Instructional Material (SIM), ii) Personal Contact Programme (PCP), iii) Online SSS through social networking, iv) Internal evaluation or Assignments.

Curricula Augmentation

There are eight papers in total for each subject Bengali and English which is divided into two parts each consisting of four papers to be completed by the learner within a year. The design of content for PG curricula has been developed by the Board of Studies (BoS) of concerned discipline. The following (Table 3) are the course wise content distribution which needs teaching support for enrolled learner.

Table 3. Course content distribution needs of the enrolment support services

Course	Course Content nature		Reading of texts			Conceptual Topics (referential reading)	No of papers & Marks
	Objective reading	Subjective reading	Selective reading	Referential/ analytical reading	both		
PGB	40%	50%	60%	40%	80%	30%	8papers @100marks 800marks
PGEG	60%	40%	70%	30%	70%	30%	8papers@ 100marks

Self Instructional Material (SIM)

The major distinction between conventional and open university underlies in the educational material they have produced to cater to their learner activities. It is of utmost importance for an open university to prepare good, purpose-based and effective educational material, either in print or in audio-visual /electronic form. Printed SIM is basically the identity of a traditional open university through which it reaches to the learner. Netaji Subhas Open University has developed quality self learning material (SIM) in print form. In the last 15 years, the NSOU has made enormous effort in this field. Study notes, references, assignment guide, audio-visual lectures etc. are the components of this educational resources.

At NSOU, the design and production of educational material follows the procedure provided in Table 4.

Table 4. Educational material production process at NSOU

Subjects Under SoH, NSOU	No of Module		SIM in Print (Study Module)	References in print (in book/ photocopy form)	Audio-Visual SIM (in DVD/CD form) In 2014-16	
	Module	Unit			Lectures	DVD/CD
Bengali	32	190	14 Books	3 (for compulsory paper) low priced edition 2 (for optional paper)	40	15(DVD) 3(CD)
English	32	128	8 Books	1 photocopy reference (52 pages)	27	8 1(CD)

These curricula based materials have been written or developed by the resource persons identified by the Board of Studies of the concerned subject. Language is lucid and the approach is purpose-based. It actually replaces the role of a face-to-face teacher of conventional system. No doubt this is a challenging task for the course writer and the coordinator as well. The subjective or interpretative portion of the syllabus(as mentioned in Table 3) have been developed in such a way that one learner can get breath upon. Critical endeavours of literary study have been promoted by the SIM itself. Since 2014, School of Humanities has started Curriculum based AVL preparation programme from April to September each year ; which is a continuous process. Experts from other conventional universities has taken an important role in this regard.

Personal Contact Programme (PCP)

After getting enrolled in a PG course like Bengali or English, the learners are offered PCP (Personal Contact Programme) once in a week which is not mandatory. The PCPs' are normally arranged on Sundays in different Study Centres which as mentioned earlier, are all State funded/aided Degree colleges located far away from head quarter of Kolkata. Learners are offered 6 hours of PCP per day(Sunday) in four slots of 1.5hrs. For humanities group subjects in PG level, NSOU offers 30 counselling hours in 5 consecutive Sundays. It can be noted that all the study centres are not fixed as PCP centre. As per enrolment of learner in different Study Centres across the state, they are clubbed into some suitable PCP centres which has proper infrastructure to hold PCP on Sundays.

These PCP sessions are taught by the full time college teachers appointed in substantive post in nearby colleges and universities. It is an arrangements that can be seen as effective use of human resource in ODeL to maintain the quality of teaching in PCP's. There is one academic coordinator per PCP centre engaged by the Director, School of Studies of NSOU. Most likely they are senior college or university professor of concerned subject. Here are the findings of PG PCP shown in

chart form.

Table 5. Participation rates according to PCP distribution

Subjects		No of PCP Centres (Centre code)	No. of Counsellors (Approved by the School of Humanities, NSOU)	Distribution of learner (Average)	Percentage of attendance (Average)
Bengali	2013	13	90	150 - 200	50% - 60%
	2014	14	120	200 - 250	60% - 70%
	2015	14	125	250 - 300	60% - 65%
English	2013	5	45	150-200	75%
	2014	5	45	250 - 300	70%
	2015	6	60	200 - 250	75%

The attendance of the learners in PCP is high though it is not mandatory. In the case of English PCP, it is observed that the percentage is a bit higher than the Bengali PCP. In PG curricula, as shown in the Table 4, the portion that needs subjective reading, are discussed in PCP sessions. The learners usually take part in interactive counselling programme in good numbers though it is not mandatory to sit for the examination.

Internal Assessment & Evaluation

Internal assessment and evaluation system is another component of student support service of NSOU, that is very useful to the learner. It confirms the re-reading of texts and other references covering entire syllabus of the course. Each paper of 100 marks has an assignment paper containing critical questions and topics to be answered by the learner himself from their home. Basically this is an open book home assignment which forces them to find the answer from their SIM and other reference book mentioned therein. The preparation of assignment papers are made centrally by the approved academic body of the subject concerned and the same is uploaded into the website of NSOU. Learners are used to take print out of the assignment paper and work them out. The answer scripts submitted by the learner in their respective study centre within the stipulations laid down by the competent authority of NSOU, are checked and back to them with detailed comments and marks. The weight of marks is 20%, while the Term End Examination holds 80%..

Home assignment helps a learner to check his/her performance over the syllabus. It also engages them to have critical reading of texts and to assimilate their reading with other references. In this process, one learner enrolled in a study centre can connect himself / herself with the evaluator, who is also a designated teacher of the college of conventional system. This arrangement evokes more interactive space between the teacher and the learner.

Online Student Support Service (SSS)

Online support to the learner is important and essential in ODeL. It requires basic computer knowledge of the learner and networking infrastructure of our society. As mentioned earlier, the internet access and average speed of connectivity has not reached to that extent in Bengal as well as in India as a whole; by which one OU can plan to expand its educational planning to rural or suburban areas. But surely it is growing day by day. Innovative planning in learner support service can yield results. Young people are using android cell phones and social media like Facebook, Twitter, etc. which can be accessible in low bandwidth connection.

The school of Humanities of NSOU has planned to extend online student support service through Facebook and Google chat using Trillion software. The support has been extended for three months, 15th February to 30th April in weekdays. Subject wise Fb account and Google ID has been created. Faculty members have been allotted to be present as per schedule in their respective cubicle of place of work. They have prepared themselves to answer the query of the learner, make ready the academic content needs to be shared in soft form (JPG files, PDF files etc.). Learners get online chat facility with the core faculty of concerned subject located at Academic Campus, Kalyani which is 70 KM away from Kolkata. All the chat threads have been routed through the Director/Officer-in-charge, SoH located Headquarter, NSOU at Kolkata through Trillion software. It is seen from the findings that the demand of this online support service has increased in about 50% in 2015-16 than it is in the last year 2014-15.

The following chart shows how the learners has been engaged themselves in this virtual online interaction in NSOU

Table 6. Learners' engagements in virtual online interaction

Year (Google & Facebook)	Subject wise ID (Google & Facebook)	Core faculty of NSOU involved	Hour of online support	No of hits	Learner supported
2014-15	nsou@wbnsou.ac.in	Bengali 1 English 1	150 hrs @3hrs (5days x12weeks)	1645	500 (approx)
2015-16	soh.bengali@gmail.com soh.bengali (Facebook) soh.english2016@gmail.com soh.english (Facebook)	Bengali 3 English 3	150hrs @3hrs (5days x 12 weeks)	3556	1200 (approx)

Conclusion

Thus the findings coming out from the experience of NSOU in Open and Distance praxis, illustrates how divergent and purposed-based approach can be adopted. ODI pedagogy is not closed and fixed. It can be customized with the necessity or settings of any given societal milieu. The array of planned multi-layered approach can yield good results. Especially in the field of Humanities Studies, where the face-to-face mode of teaching has a historical root, this ODeL praxis can be posed in a different way. The heterogeneity of learner in ODeL is a challenge before us to plan any comprehensive academic approach in teaching humanities. As there is no instructor present physically before a learner, the criticality of study or learning in ODeL become more challenging.

The paper illustrates five important aspects of learning analytics of literature studies under NSOU. Compare to conventional mode of teaching it illustrates four major component that can generate more learning space. Beside that, the human resources of state funded higher education institutes or universities can be utilized in more effective way. It is assumed that the blended approach in teaching literature studies could bring trust and mutual reciprocation in a learner centric model of education. Moreover, the experience of SSS of Netaji Subhas Open University shows that where the technology enhanced learning pedagogy has not gained enough objective basis in the society, can float such hybrid model of teaching to deal with such large number of enrolled learner.

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