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STUDY OF USING BLENDED MODE FOR TEACHER TRAINING WITH FOCUS ON BUILDING MORAL CAPABILITIES FOR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL PROGRESS

ABSTRACT

Capability building depends upon developing skills, clarifying concepts, practicing right attitudes, enriching moral/spiritual qualities, and acquiring relevant information. The 'Scenario-Based' design of the DL B.Ed (e-Education) of the 'Indian Consortium for Educational Transformation' has incorporated these components resulting into students' performing well and creating new common social wealth.

 Early e-learning systems, based on Computer-Based Learning/Training often attempted to replicate autocratic teaching styles whereby the role of the e-learning system was assumed to be for transferring knowledge, as opposed to systems developed later based on Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL), which encouraged the shared development of knowledge.

The paper is on the lessons learnt by I-Consent and partner institutions about using blended mode in the pilot batch of its B.Ed teacher education programme, focusing on building moral capabilities for personal development and social progress. This mode allows teachers to work with students without regular personal meetings. The approach is based on capability building and co-creativity processes, using cooperative learning/working. Hence it is both curriculum based, and life/work centric - - following a learning/developing path - - and its goal is to enable a learner to 'form, reform and transform' oneself, and one's group to perform together.

In this paper the researcher, who is the team leader of e-B.Ed courses, collate and analyse the feedback from the course designers, the local mentors and the students who share their

experiences regarding the strengths and the weaknesses of this approach -- both teaching and scaffolding, and their recommendations on how differently the course may be designed for greater success.

DEFINITIONS

'Course Teams', the group who have designed various Courses, normally playing the role of tutors/mentors too. Each course team has a team leader.

'Tutors' are the subject experts who normally conduct Distributed Classrooms, provide feedback to the students about their learning activities and evaluate their assignments.

'Mentors' refer to the local guides available at the Study Centres where students would gather for DCs or visit anytime for guidance.

'Distributed Classrooms' are virtual classrooms conducted through the Internet in real time and are normally followed by face-to-face (F2F) contact sessions at the Study Centres and guided by the mentors.

'Blended Learning' approach combines face to face classroom methods with computer mediated activities to form an integrated instructional approach.

INTRODUCTION

Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU) (http://ycmou.digitaluniversity.ac/) was established by the YCMOU act 1989 (Mah. XX of 1989), and is located at Dnyangangotri, near Gangapur Dam, Nashik 422 222.

Indian Consortium for Education Transformation (I- CONSENT) was established by the institutional and individual membership of the participating institutions on 14th March 2008 in Pune. It is represented by the NETRA that works for educational transformation and is located at the office of the Maharashtra Knowledge Corporation Ltd. (MKCL), Pune. YCMOU, MKCL and the I-CONSENT signed a MoU for establishment of e-B.Ed programme as a replicable and sustainable programme and as a model for Teacher Education having international relevance and ability to be replicated.

The Baha'i Academy (www.bahaiacademy.org) is an educational institution engaged in research and action in the field of value education for institutions of higher learning. Together with YCMOU and MKCL, the Academy is one of the founding members of the I-Consent. The Academy offers courses on Fostering Personal Development and Social Progress with the focus of building moral capabilities to a number of reputed universities, including YCMOU, and their affiliated colleges in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh in India.

The programme of Bachelor of e-education called e-B.Ed is designed as a new paradigm programme suitable for a connected society in which learning, working and developing are integrated. It is offered through online and face to face (F2F). It is based on constructivist theory of education employing situated based design. Various scenarios have been developed depicting the situations that a teacher would face at his classroom, school or community.

BUILDING MORAL CAPABILITIES FOR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL PROGRESS

One of the goals of this programme is to help students develop their moral purpose and value system, the core values mentioned in the preamble of the Indian constitution, and acquire such moral capabilities as to contribute to building a society based on equality, justice and universal human values. "Developing moral capabilities is the concern of those whose lives are governed by a moral purpose. In this age of transition, moral purpose must be focused on two paramount tasks: growing intellectually and spiritually as an individual and contributing to the transformation of society." (FUNDAEC, 2003, p.15) This is a 'must' aspect of education. According to Ramamurti Committee (1990, p.19), "Education must provide a climate for the nurture of values, both as a personalised set of values, forming one's character and including necessarily social, cultural and national values, so as to have a context and meaning for actions and decisions, and in order to enable the persons to act with conviction and commitment". And the 'primary task' of a teacher is to ensure that students become such responsible citizens. Chattopadhyay Commission, 1985, has stated, "We underscore that the primary task of the teacher is concerned with man-making, namely the making of the Indian of tomorrow". In this regard the e-B.Ed programme aimed at bridging this important void that vastly existed in the other teacher education programmes available in the country. Hence one of the three components of the 'Course 1' of the e-B.Ed programme focused on cooperative and collaborative learning and working and building moral capabilities. The Programme itself followed public- private- partnership in its deployment.

DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES OF THE PROGRAMME

All the six courses of the Programme have specific learning outcomes and explicit developmental outcomes. For example in case of the Course 1 some of its developmental outcomes were:

Module B: Cooperative Learning for Development with Universal Human Values

Developmental outcome: By the end of this Module the learner will be able to

• Conduct a community action project for cooperative/collaborative working and developing so as to create social common wealth.

Module C: Culture of Quality and Excellence in e-education

Developmental outcome: By the end of this Module the learner will be able to

- Adapt and apply the relevant tool, techniques, models and methods in his context (situation).

PARADIGM SHIFT

Hear a paradigm shift has taken place: from competition to cooperation, from static content to dynamic learning resources and OERs, from print to e-multimedia, from local storage/access to distributed networked storage, from limited local access to unlimited access to any one—anywhere—anytime, from one-fit- for-all to personalized learning, from non-replicating to replicating knowledge resources and from single user to multiple user resources. To ensure such a shift and to achieve the outcomes Blended Mode of learning is important.

BLENDED LEARNING

In this programme blended learning offers the learners the opportunity "to be both together and apart". It provides a good mix of technologies and interactions, resulting in a socially supported constructivist learning experience. This in especially significant, given the profound effect that it could have on distance learning.

In this course the Tutor begins a course with an introductory lesson in the Distributed Classroom and then proceeds with follow up materials online, using computers in a physical classroom, along with face to face instruction.

The programme used synchronous and asynchronous modes. Synchronous mode at the time of Distributed Classroom, and otherwise asynchronous mode. Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) as well as Cooperative Learning (Pair structures, Team Structures and Brainstorming) was used to enhance peer learning and develop social skills and human values among students.

OBSERVATIONS AND OUR LEARNING

A)   Course Design:

1)   Situated Learning Design and Constructivist Approach: At the initial stages students were asked to identify their own situations they wanted to improve—as classroom, school/ institutions, or community. The course design enabled students to apply their learning in a creative manner to their own situations.

Learning: This design is a great strength of the programme making it useful to many categories of learners, not just school teachers, to adapt the approach to their social context.

In other words, such approach facilitates evolvement of alternative learning paths that learners can choose while undertaking such courses.

2)   Cooperative Learning, collaborative learning and cooperative games: Here peer learning with deeper understanding and feeling better about themselves happens. Learners learn social skills such as problem solving, asking questions, team work, conflict resolution, etc.. They enjoyed the work and learnt joyfully resulting into higher order cognitive skills, better performance and information retention. Some more simple structures such as Pair and Team structures were used in both modes. Cooperative learning was used with a variety of other teaching strategies.

Inadequate familiarity of some Study Centre mentor with all cooperative learning strategies posed challenges and ERA, the programme LMS, did not provide enough discussion forums. So the students made their own arrangements, such as E-mail, for team activities.

Learning: To effectively implement Cooperative Learning arrangements should be made in advance to train the local mentors as well as provide suitable forums in the LMS. Mentors/ learners should know the different online social platforms available to interact and learn cooperatively.

Moreover students should learn a topic via cooperative learning structures in the presence of the mentors to use it more effectively.

In case of collaborative learning tasks should be distributed according to student's liking and abilities, with monitoring arrangements so that workload will be equally distributed. .

Cooperative games enhanced learner participation. They enjoyed the games played outside the contact sessions, but they meet their objectives better if played in Study Centres with mentors.

3)   Learning Activities for skill development and Assignments: Course teams were permitted to include as many not-to-be-assessed learning activities so that students receive feedback from their tutors. For example Course 1 had 24 learning activities; other Courses initially were not much different. Students did not find time to complete the activities, and tutors had no time to comment on them. Subsequently their number was reduced in other courses. A similar problem existed for the assessable assignments.

Learning: While designing the courses, average time student need to complete a course should be calculated according to the capabilities of the average students who may have challenges of language, technology, accessibility, etc. The learners undertaking online course should be self-regulated and intrinsically motivated.

4)   Practical activities for skill development: The course included certain practical activities related to moral capabilities, for example promoting gender equality. Students' reports were encouraging.

Learning: Practical activities are welcomed by the students. The activities during the contact sessions after the DCs have also been well received.

5)   'Service Learning Activities' for building moral capabilities and creating social common wealth: 'Developmental Outcome' of this course required students to design and carry out community projects individually or in groups. They identified the situations they wished to improve. Broad guidelines were provided. Students' report that they greatly learned from their practical activities and projects. Actually some students considered Module 'B' as their life turning point.

Learning: Service Learning Activities play a major role in developing students' capabilities and engagement in meaningful community services. Freedom to select their situation and projects made it more successful. They worked passionately on gender equality in community, value education and computer education at school level, etc..

6)   Clarity/simplicity of language and volume of essential readings: A clear, simple and unambiguous language ensures smooth transmission of message. Sometimes students, from vernacular background, felt the language of the materials was difficult, assignments were ambiguous or not related to the course. Later certain clarifications were provided to the students. Those who studied in groups were able to overcome this problem. In a Course the essential reading material was too extensive.

Learning: Checking the content and uniformity of the course format before uploading them on the LMS is essential. Three team leaders have been identified to handle this matter for the subsequent launch. Simplified version of some materials or other teaching aids - - a spoken tutorials and a lexicon of hard words - - have been prepared for the next batch. An initial pilot study could have been helpful.

Course designers should identify the minimum required essential readings and try to find suitable OERs for as many components of the course as possible. This is now being followed by the course-teams.

B)   Distributed Classrooms (DCs):

7)   Software and Internet connectivity: During the sessions the Internet connectivity wasn't always smooth due to the diverse internet facilities available among the students, especially at home. Their facilities ranged from dial-up to broad band. Sometimes audio was not heard or students could not come online.

Learning: Since DCs play an important role in this blended mode the software should be user-friendly and efficient and Internet connection should be reliable.

In any case every DC session should be recorded and made easily available to the students for future to address these problems.

Distributing in advance to the students and mentors the DC timetable, and the handouts made the DCs more fruitful and activities carried out properly. A well planned DC relates the lectures and presentations to the forthcoming activities and assignments. Post DC session, tutor should remain in touch with the students. Students should log in at least fifteen minutes before the DC session to check their connectivity and voice quality.

Study Centres should ensure that the minimum facilities such as computers, headphones and UPS are available to conduct DC sessions.

C)   The Programme Learning Management System (LMS):

8)   'ERA' LMS: It is quite elaborate and a powerful tool used by thousands of students every year. However since it was not designed for this programme, there were certain difficulties that students, mentors and tutors faced:

a.   *Students' teething problem*s: Some of the students had inadequate IT literacy to use ERA. It has now been decided to have a one month minimum computer literacy module before next batch begins.

b.   *E-portfolios*: Students had to post some of their work to their respective e-portfolios which ERA did not have until much later during other semesters.

c.   *Submission Deadlines*: Deadlines had to be extended more than twice that was permissible by ERA. On the other hand being a distance learning course it was announced that students had four years time to complete the course. ERA needed modification.

Learning: Getting everything right in the start is difficult, so the tutors, mentors and students need flexibility and adjustment. This should be pointed out at the beginning. Moreover tutors must be aware of the students' difficulties and make alternatives to minimize their discomfort.

D)   Course Teams, Experts, Programme Mentors, Tutors:

9)   Workshops to design the courses: During nearly four years there were many workshops involving course teams, experts, a group of nearly 40 educationists, and international resource persons to brain storm, share experiences and learn new approaches to design and implement this programme that was innovative and 'unique' in several ways. The designing process was not a 'cut-paste' approach. It needed lots of unlearning, relearning, and

efforts to reach unity of thought. All the partners felt they were transforming themselves first and were benefitted by being there.

Learning: The vision of educational transformation, challenges of innovation, and the opportunity for learning and building their own capacity created a driving force and lasting motivation for the group to work together several years. It resulted into a win-win situation for all the partners who developed their own capacities and carried new abilities to their own institutions.

10)   Mentors' training: It was observed that students who had access to trained mentors performed better compared to other students, specially in relation to the Module 'B' of the course 1, as some of the mentors were not very familiar with the subject.

Learning: Training mentors prior to start of each course is highly essential so that despite all the technological challenges, students will still be in a position to receive the required guidance.

11)   Tutors' response to students' queries: Some tutors were very prompt in responding to students queries. Not everybody was so.

Learning: Tutors prompt response gave students greater motivation to study smoothly without any breaks.

12)   Periodic consultation meetings of the Course Team members and Experts to resolve issues: Often consultation involving all the course-teams/leaders were held to clear the air about many issues and reinforce unity of thought. Certain topics came up several times and certain tasks had to be redone, involving some fundamental issues such as integration of the courses, consistency of all courses, evaluation system, mentors' training, etc..

For example the levels of students' performance - - basic, professional, excellence, creativity- - were not well defined at the beginning. They were formulated later. Another issue was that the number of tutor was not consistent for various courses. This created mixed impacts on certain courses. Many of the latter assignments did not have much connection to the earlier courses.

Learning: This matter points out to a basic exercise needed when programme was being conceptualized. Creating a "framework" by all the partners could properly have been the answer. " To create his work of art, the artist first sets up a frame and defines the space within which his brush can move, translating his vision into reality…Leading a creative life of initiative implies that you work within a framework which defines the social and mental spaces available and permissible to you and which disciplines your movements. Your assumptions, your ideals, the way you interpret the world around you, your aims, your values,

your approach to life are but a few of the elements that form the framework of your endeavours." (FUNDAEC, 2003, p.50) Such a "framework" could have addressed issues such as the basic philosophy binding the partners, the principles and values governing their working relationships, their methods and approaches, the role of learning and developmental outcomes in the programme, assessment and evaluation, recognition and certification, course design, mentors' training, technological support, etc. Such a framework would have made the course as a 'whole' and would created more consistency among its components.

CONCLUSION

Considering its content and methods and the consortium approach taken by the partners, the e-B.Ed programme marked a bold step in transforming the programmes of Teacher Education (B.Ed) in India. Although it started with a pilot run as a humble beginning, it was a very courageous step involving about 15 institutions of higher learning, both public and private, and some NGOs who worked together with great confidence in the form of 40 educationists for about four years before the programme was launched. The support of the Commonwealth of Learning was crucial to the entire operation.

Their united action met with success in its pilot run, as a good number of the students exceeded the expectations of the programme designers who had to keep raising their yard sticks and create more spaces for the interested students to become more creative. Despite various challenges that it faced, the partners remained confident and kept an open mind to learn and improve. The twelve learning instances that have briefly been mentioned in this paper are some of the important lessons that may prove to be useful to other enterprising educationists who may aspire to stretch the limits of teacher education programmes in open and distance mode beyond the conventional approaches and make them oriented towards building students' capabilities for personal, educational, and social development.

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