UNIT 4 SUPPLEMENTAL INTERACTION

Structure

4.0 Introduction

4.1 Learning Outcomes

4.2 Discussion on the Biases of a Conventional Teacher: A Justification

4.3 Significance of Supplemental Interaction

4.4 Supplemental Interaction: Offering Additional Support to Learners
   4.4.1 Tasks of a Distance Teacher
   4.4.2 Submission Density of Assignment-Responses
   4.4.3 Tutorials

4.5 Supplemental Interaction through E-mail Tools

4.6 Let Us Sum Up

4.7 References and Further Readings

4.8 Feedback to Check Your Progress Questions

4.0 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 2 of this block we focused on tutor-comments—the need for them, their functions, and the different types of tutor-comments and how to present them. It was suggested that such comments may satisfy the academic and/or personal needs of the distance learner, and that they constitute the most significant means of building communication between the distance learner and the distance teacher. It was also indicated that for the ‘uninitiated’, it might not be an easy task to write purposeful (teaching type) comments. Of course, some teachers/tutors may write such comments intuitively, but many need to be oriented towards, and informed about the basics of such comments in order to make them successful tools right from the earliest stages of their involvement in distance teaching.

Units 1 and 3 dealt with additional issues pertaining to distance tuition. In this unit, we have focused on the biases which a conventional teacher brings to the job, when called upon to function as a distance teacher. We have discussed these biases from various points of view quite elaborately, as today in most cases it is the conventional teachers who are appointed as distance teachers, and they need to know what biases may hinder their work as well as how and why they hinder their work. Such knowledge/information is likely to help them overcome these biases. Besides, we discussed the question of ‘uniformity’ in evaluating the learners’ work. It should be noted that in most cases, evaluators in large numbers are employed to evaluate ‘assignment-responses’ received from hundreds of distance learners. We tried to show that it may not be possible to achieve absolute uniformity or ‘objectivity’ of assessment in such cases; however, training and practice should help in reducing the degree of divergence which might otherwise be very large.
An additional suggestion was made that a study of such divergences should help the institution in identifying and replacing assessors who are abnormally lenient or strict. Obviously, the issues discussed in Units 1-3 are significant as far as effective distance teaching is concerned. Equally significant are certain other issues which we need to discuss to complete our exposition of the theme of distance tuition with special reference to developing countries. These issues are:

i) Why did we choose to discuss and look into the biases of a conventional teacher at all or what was the motivation behind bringing in this theme for a discussion? (Note that this issue is an off-shoot of Unit 2 of this block.)

ii) What are supplemental comments – their relevance and significance?

iii) What are the other, significant though minor, issues that have direct relevance to efficient pedagogy/andragogy in distance education?

We shall take up these issues in the above order.

### 4.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

In this unit we aim at justifying our discussion on the biases of a conventional teacher and highlighting the significance of supplemental communication. We have also touched upon issues such as the ‘prerequisites’ which a distance teacher may expect from his/her teaching more in order to better his/her performance and make his/her teaching more purposeful. Then, we have discussed notions of submission density of assignment-responses, and tutorials.

After working through this unit, you should be able to:

- Analyse the inadequacies of an untrained distance teacher;
- List the reasons for supplemental communication in distance education;
- Identify the ‘prerequisites’ which a distance teacher needs to teach effectively; and
- Identify the ways in which supplemental communication contributes to effective two way communication in distance education.

### 4.2 DISCUSSION ON THE BIASES OF A CONVENTIONAL TEACHER: A JUSTIFICATION

In the academic world, distance education is a unique phenomenon, even more so in the developing world. It is not unusual, therefore, for reasonably knowledgeable people to raise a question like “After all, what does it mean by distance education”?

It is no wonder, then, that common school and college teachers too raise such questions. And when called upon to function as distance teachers, they go by the belief that they can function as distance
teachers as effectively as they do in their classrooms, or that their new situations do not make any specific or different types of demands on their new skills and attitudes. We cannot blame these teachers for such notions; as such misconceptions are propagated, wittingly or unwittingly, by the very bodies/institutions which are expected to remove them. We need not, in fact should not, blame teachers in this case. (The point that is being made here is very crucial, as it presents a significant aspect of our current educational environment.) One such institution, for example, in the Indian case is the University Grants Commission. We shall elaborate upon this point.

Most distance education programmes conducted in India are based on the untenable assumption that a teacher brought up on and engaged in face-to-face teaching (let us call him the conventional teacher), is also an effective distance teacher.

The underlying claims in the above statement are:

i) that the assumption has actually been made and

ii) that the assumption is untenable.

Now we shall investigate the validity of the above claims and if they are found to be valid, suggest ways to prevent the educational waste that is caused by the above assumption.

Are these claims valid?

To establish the first claim we must engage in a detailed discussion. It is sufficiently proved by the recruitment policy (with regard to the Correspondence Departments or Directorates) which has been in force during the last two decades. It is stated that “the qualifications, designation, mode of appointment and the pay scales of teachers in the correspondence course institutions should be the same as for teachers in the university teaching departments. All the future appointments for the correspondence institutions should be made in the corresponding teaching departments of the university and the incumbents renewed, if necessary”. (UGC Circular No. F, 19-1/74 (ER), Jan, 1981. New Delhi).

Vagueness of UGC guidelines

Now, we shall look at the second claim, which also needs to be discussed in detail. To begin this discussion, we must make a brief mention of some of the relevant guidelines for Correspondence Courses circulated by the University Grants Commission, Government of India.

The two guidelines which are of immediate relevance to us are:

i) The distance teacher may be called upon to perform the following duties:

   a) Edit, write, revise and translate lesson;

   b) Evaluate response sheets carefully and thoroughly, correct them, write detailed comments, explain faults and lapses in unambiguous terms. (To ensure that these duties are performed properly, the Commission suggests that 10% of the response sheets should be sample-checked, and for this purpose, provision has been made for utilizing the services of outside experts); and
Assessment of Learner Performance

c) Teach at contact-programmes. (It is said that teaching at a contact-programme is different from teaching in a classroom and that it can be done better by the distance teacher because, he/she is familiar with the material provided in the teaching units. Besides, it provides him/her the much needed feedback, he/she understands the distance learner, his/her requirements, and the shortcomings of the course materials).

ii) In order to make distance education effective, care should be taken to:

a) Keep the learner motivated by reducing the time lag between receipt and the return of the response sheets;

b) Develop useful rapport with the distance learner to mitigate his/her ‘feeling of isolation’ (comments on response sheets play a significant role in achieving this objective); and

c) Educate the distance learner about the significance of written assignments. (Good responses may be ensured if the awards scored by the distance learners in response sheets are counted in lieu of internal assessment.)

Failure to Differentiate the Distance Teacher from the Conventional Teacher

Even a very superficial study of item (i) (a) shows that a distance teacher may be called upon to perform certain duties which the conventional teacher is not necessarily qualified or trained to perform, though there may be college and university teachers who engage in writing, editing or translating.

Nevertheless, writing a teaching unit for the distance learner is a task entirely different from writing a textbook, a work-book or the like. Items (ii) (a), (b), and (c) imply that the problems of the distance learners, namely, their lack of motivation, sense of isolation, and their possible indifference toward the assignments have been identified, and their adverse effects calculated. Accordingly, certain methodological steps have been suggested to overcome the problems of the distance teachers. However, the corresponding problems of the distance teachers have not been identified, as there is no mention of them in the document under consideration because the job of the distance teacher has not been conceived as an entity different from that of the conventional teacher.

It appears quite reasonable, however, to assert that the distance teacher is faced with the problems of lack of motivation, pangs of isolation, and carelessness toward assignments and/or ‘assignment responses’, as much as the distance learner is.

Does the distance teacher need to be prepared to overcome these difficulties?

Why sample checking?

In item (i) (b) the tasks of the distance teacher in relation to ‘assignment responses’ have been explicitly spelled out. However, the provision for ‘sample checking’ for purposes of ensuring ‘proper evaluation’ makes it evident that unlike the conventional teacher, the distance teacher needs to be supervised. The conventional teacher may
legitimately be expected to know and perform his/her tasks satisfactorily, for if not specifically trained for his/her tasks, he/she has, at last, observed his/her own teachers performing the said tasks over the years and may follow any of the models he/she knows. The distance teacher, on the other hand, has no models to depend on. And, therefore, it is not without reason that he/she is made to face ‘sample-checking’.

**Contact programme is different from classroom teaching**

Under item i(c), it has been said that teaching at contact-programmes is a task entirely different from the conventional types of classroom teaching and that the choice of the distance teacher, (as against that of the conventional teacher) for this particular purpose finds support in the argument that the distance teacher is familiar with the ‘content’ of the course. The ‘content’ of the course, one may counter the argument, is also known to the conventional teacher. Perhaps a better argument in favour of the above choice might be that the distance teacher understands the distance learner better, for he/she is familiar with the difficulties of the latter. But the contact-programme, on the contrary is seen as the occasion when the distance teacher gets an opportunity to understand the distance learner better [see item (i) (c) above]. If this is so, why cannot the conventional teacher do so as well?

**Is the ‘outside-expert’ different from the conventional teacher?** Under item (i) (b) it is suggested that ‘external experts’ should be used for ‘sample-checking’. This apparently supports the equation between the distance teacher and the conventional teacher. But when items (i) (b) and (c) are read together the internal contradictions in the document manifest themselves explicitly. Does this ‘outside expert’ know the ‘content’, the distance learner, and the drawbacks of the teaching units which a particular distance teacher is working with? Who is he/she, if not a conventional teacher? If he/she is not a conventional teacher, what makes him/her an ‘OUTSIDE EXPERT’?

The following two points emerge from the above discussion:

i) In terms of actual job requirements, an equation between the conventional teacher and the distance teacher just does not exist; and

ii) The difficulties which the distance teacher has to face on his/her job have not even been recognized, much less identified or dealt with.

**Need to change the policies of the Directorates of Correspondence Courses**

It should be noted that the ‘guidelines’ referred to in the above discussion are very old. The argument that the recent ‘guidelines’ issued by the UGC in this connection may be different and based on better information and knowledge is not only weak but also irrelevant, as most of the Distance Education Directorates (DDI) all over the country have hardly changed their policies and practices. It takes time to bring about socio-educational changes; and if the prestigious institutions themselves fail to rise to the occasion, it is understandable that common citizens (in this case teachers) should continue to be biased, and function according to the untenable assumptions they may have made about themselves and distance education.
To modify these assumptions, we need to be as emphatic as we can – this amply justifies the elaborate discussion above and the one we carried on in Units 1 and 3 of this block. Having thus justified our concern for the biases of the conventional teacher, we established the fact that there are functional differences between a conventional teacher and a distance teacher. We shall now look into one of the many distinctive functions of the latter.

**Check Your Progress 1**

**Notes:**

a) *Space is given below for your answer.*

b) *Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.*

Identify at least three reasons to show that a good conventional teacher need not also necessarily be a good ‘distance teacher’.

...................................................................................................................

...................................................................................................................

...................................................................................................................

...................................................................................................................

4.3 **SIGNIFICANCE OF SUPPLEMENTAL INTERACTION**

In Unit 2, we did talk about three levels of communication, one of which we said, may be called ‘supplemental communication’. Such communication follows primary communication (i.e. academic and/or personal) which appears in the form of tutor comments.

After a distance learner gets his/her evaluated assignment responses back from the institution, he/she feels a need for further explanations – he/she may not agree with the tutor’s comments, or assessment, or some other significant point may emerge from those comments. In either case, the learner would continue communicating with and expect replies from the tutors. Such communication may be called ‘Supplemental Communication’, and it is welcome.

Though there is no way of saying what the theme of such communication might be, it is possible to talk about a few generalities. Diverse disciplines will give rise to diverse questions; differing learner background and abilities, and differing tutor comments will also give rise to different types of supplemental communication. Obviously, one cannot talk about all of them, but we can certainly make a few generalizations which must prove helpful to a prospective distance teacher. We shall, in the main, focus on the generalization pertaining to tutor-attitudes which is of immediate relevance to us.

We have touched upon ‘tutor-attitudes’ by presenting a few illustrations. Reproduced below are a few letters written by distance learners after they had received their tutor-marked assignments and the corresponding replies sent by the tutors. We have divided them into the following two categories:

i) The letters (written by distance learners) with their corresponding replies (written by distance teachers); and
Different replies written by different tutors to one and the same distance learner or similar letters (written by more than one distance learner).

Before we look into these letters we need to make the following observations:

i) The letters we are reproducing below are actual letters, written by actual distance learners working on an actual course provided by the distance mode of education. And the replies too have been written by actual teachers engaged in distance education. However, all the teachers are of the conventional type (see the use of the term in the previous section), i.e., they were not initiated or oriented into distance teaching, though they were experienced in face-to-face teaching.

ii) We have not used the actual names of the learners and the teachers. Instead we have used numbers to indicate their identities. However, the language used by all of them has been left unaltered.

iii) Wherever needed the teachers were provided with the assignment-responses once again to prepare their replies.

Now, here are the letters and their replies. Each letter is immediately followed by its corresponding reply. The letters from the learners are in the normal Roman type face, while the replies sent by the tutors are in italics.

Category (I), i.e., Letters 1, 2, and 3 (L1, L2 and L3) with corresponding replies 1, 2, and 3 (R1, R2 and R3).

L1  
Dear Sir /Madam,

I happened to see the grades of learner No.3. He scores ‘B’. On comprising our grades I feel I deserve ‘A’, for he has not listed as many points as I have. Besides, he has put in a lot of irrelevant material in his answer. Either he must get a lower grade, say ‘C’ or ‘D’ or I must get ‘A’.

Could you kindly explain why I should not get ‘A’?

Yours sincerely,

Learner No.1  

R1  
Dear Learner,

I am sorry to say that I could not assess the assignments correctly. What led to the wrong evaluation is still not clear to me. I may tell you that I had gone through every line of your assignment but still the most shocking thing happened unwittingly. It is good that you have come forward with your letter demanding reassessment of the scripts, thereby making a demand for justice. I didn’t think at the time that your answer deserves ‘A’. However, after reading the scripts, I have assigned ‘D’ to learner No.2 and ‘C’ to learner No.3. This must, I suppose, come to you as cold comfort.

Yours sincerely,

sd/-
Dear Sir,

It was interesting to see that all three of us, namely learners No. 1, 2 and 3 have scored a 'B'. I wonder whether you came to know that we are friends, but I should thank you that you have helped to sustain our friendship. But, to tell you the truth, I do not like No. 2's getting what I have got from you. His answer is trash when I compare it with mine. I think only the same grade I, of all three of us, have covered most of the points that you listed in the specimen answer you sent to Mr. X. Don't I deserve better treatment? Perhaps, you should have been given lower grades to Nos. 2 and 3. Kindly review our grades, and try to be fair.

Yours sincerely,

St. No. 1

R2

Dear Mr. St. No. 1,

Thank you very much on your fresh comments on my grading. Though you have stated the principles clearly, your activity on the side of application is not very encouraging.

As far as your friend learner No.2 is concerned, he has paid equal attention to both, statement of principles and application alike. I am not very happy about his language but for which we would deserve grade ‘A’.

Then your friend learner No. 3 is also in line with Mr. No. 2. Among the three it is you who seems to be very short. As you know being short is not precise.

I hope you would take a little pain in comparing your answers with learner No.2 and 3 which would help you present better in your next set of assignments. Wishing you an ‘A’ in future.

I remain,

Yours truly,

Sd/-

L3

Dear Sir,

I had prepared my answer in a great hurry, and I am sure I did not include all the points I should have. However, with your kindness I have scored an ‘A’. I am happy and thank you for your kindness. But, I think I should make the following points:

Learner No.2 scores ‘B’ grade. That throws me off my ground. His answer is entirely irrelevant and his language is horrible. If I were to grade his answers, I would not award anything beyond ‘E’. Keeping this in view, the best I deserve is “B’ and not ‘A’.

How do you react to my views?

Yours sincerely,

St. No. 1
Dear learner No. 1,

I highly appreciate this honest gesture of yours. I have gone through the answers carefully and found your reaction to my grading correct. So I am re-grading your ‘A’ as ‘B’ and ‘B’ as ‘E’ for the second answer. Thank you for the enlightening note.

Yours sincerely,

Sd/-

Category (II) i.e. Letters 1, 2 and 3 (L1, L2, L3) and the respective replies [R1 (i), R1 (ii); R2 (i), R2 (ii); and R3 (i), R3 (ii)].

L1

Dear Sir,

I know my English is poor but I tried to say all that I wanted to say, and my answer is longest, yet I score E. This is the 5th E I have scored so far. My friend (St. No. 1) has written a short answer only. He has written many points, but they are not all the relevant points. You must give me a higher grade. I very humbly say that, if not me, then my friend must get a lower grade.

Kindly, your majesty, enlighten me about my grades.

Yours sincerely,

St. No. 2

R1 (i)

Dear learner,

I received your letter and came to know that you want to learn about the grade which I have awarded you. Before giving my reasons for awarding grade ‘E’, let me take your letter into consideration.

You have accepted that your English is poor and the grade awarded to you is your 5th ‘E’.

These two things justify my evaluation of your answer script. We aim at language proficiency, correct reading, writing, speaking and listening. But your answer script tells me that you have paid no attention to language which has destroyed the meaning of your script, i.e. what you wanted to say. “Before me, four examiners have awarded you grade E’’ which again tells of lack of interest to know and learn, what the unit demands of you.

Now your friend has written a short answer and got ‘A’ while you wrote a long answer and got ‘E’. We can talk about many things in a few sentences, if we will be brief, precise and to the point. This is possible only through the best use of language without making a mess of words and phrases uselessly. Your long answer hardly touches few points of real worth and the rest of it is only a ‘play with words’. This is why I have awarded you ‘E’ which means that you need a lot of improvement while your friend has come up to the expectations of the unit.

Language proficiency is LSRW (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Your script demands only two of these i.e., reading and writing. Had you read with comprehension and answered with understanding, you would not have
Assessment of Learner Performance

got ‘E’. I hope that you will take note of these things and try to score better grades in next assignment-responses.

Your sincerely,
Sd/-

R1 (ii)

Dear Mr. X,

I wish that your English were half as good as in this letter of yours. You say that your answer is the longest and you please realise that the length has only increased the disgust. You admit that your English is poor, but then choose to be sarcastic in addressing me as ‘your ‘majesty’ and also to cast aspersions by suggesting that I have been unjust in awarding ‘A’ grade to your friend (St. No.1). I assure you that this is an utterly unfounded notion. After all, it is language, and his language is far more idiomatic and has a far clearer expression.

Even after a second thought, I notice I do not find it possible for me to give you a better grade. You have yourself said that this is the 5th ‘E’, you have scored so far and I hope that you will manage to be not so consistent in future, by making efforts to improve.

Yours sincerely,
Sd/-

L2

Dear Sir,

I was shocked to see that my friend is scoring A and I only E. My answer is not good, but his answer is not so very good.

I think if he gets A, I must get something as C or D. If I get an E he must not get more than B.

I know my English is weak, but I had written a very long answer. You have not given me anything for my long sentences and long answer. Could you revise my grade? If not, can you lower learner No. 1’s grade.

Please write to me, I am worried about the grades.

Yours sincerely,
St. No. 2

R2 (i)

Dear friend,

In response to your suggestions, I would like to inform you that my assessment was subjective. So you need not worry about it. One reason I can give you is, I read your answer soon after reading a very satisfactory answer, both in matter of content and in language. In the light of the above facts I am glad to award a D grade to you. You know some facts. But improve your English (So I have regarded the 2nd answer better and have given him a C).

You can improve by reading newspapers daily.

Yours sincerely,
Sd/-
Dear Learner

You have raised an objection to my awarding ‘A’ to your friend and your scoring ‘E’ only. It is not a matter of writing long sentences and long answer (refer to your letter), but the relevance of the answer. You were supposed to discuss the principles for the selection of text books which you could not do even the least. I awarded you ‘E’ not only because your English is weak but also because of the irrelevance of your answer in view. You have written whatever struck your mind without meeting any demands of the assignment.

It is because of the expected answer that I awarded ‘A’ to your friend. His answer is no doubt, very precise and every line in it is up to the mark which you cannot judge. If you could judge it, you would not get ‘E’.

Sd/-

Distance teacher

L3

Dear Madam,

I was shocked to see that my friend Learner No. 2 has scored a ‘B’ grade, and I only ‘C’. As far as I can see, his answer is poor; he has not answered as many points as I have. Besides, he displays some kind of love for the irrelevant.

It appears to me that you look for longer answers, irrelevant or relevant does not seem to bother you.

I was shocked that Learner 2 also gets a ‘B’. His answer is entirely off the point. I must get a batter grade. Could you review your assessment of my answer.

Yours sincerely,

St. No. 1

R3 (i)

Dear Learner No.1,

Very glad to receive your letter.

In this connection I am to state that the answer given by learner No. 2 is not irrelevant as you think of it. He covered many other points in his answer which have not been covered by you. By saying this, I do not mean that your answer is irrelevant. If you think that long answers fetch you good scores you can do so hereafter. But my assessment is based on points, paragraph answers and elaborate answering. The answer given by you has covered some points but I feel that the answer is too short. It is an essay type of question and I expected you to write more on the subject.

As such I think that there is no need to revise the grade already awarded to you. Anyhow you have passed.

Yours sincerely,

Sd/-
Dear Learner No. 1,

I am happy that you come together, which I had, in fact, wished to happen. I am happier still that you have gone through the other answers; that itself is quite a good experience, isn’t it?

Regarding your doubt no. 1, Learner No. 2 has answered the two parts of the assignment whereas you have touched only three principles of a good text.

Doubt No. 2 – your English is alright. But you have still better chances of exhausting all the points. Whereas, Learner No. 2 if encouraged properly, will improve in course of time.

Yours sincerely,

We shall reflect on the above replies to see what we may learn from them.

CATEGORICAL 1

Letter 1, Reply 1

The evaluator admits that he was wrong and makes the relevant corrections, but adds the last sentence which betrays the fact that he is annoyed.

Letter 2, Reply 2

This is quite a balanced reply. However, the evaluator displays carelessness in using the expression Mr. No. 2 at one place and St. No. 2 at another. Similarly, “You seem to be very short” does not convey what the evaluator wants to say.

Letter 3, Reply 3

This reply is somewhat sudden in nature. The evaluator is either fully convinced of what the learner has written, or does not want to get into an argument. We hope that the former is the case.

CATEGORICAL II

Letter 1, Replies 1 (i) and (ii)

Notice the difference between the two replies — while the first is explanatory, the second is more like an attack than anything else.

Letter 2, Replies 2 (i) and 2 (ii)

Notice the cause for grading the response wrongly, the reply (i) and the explanatory reply (ii). The last two sentences in the second reply are in bad taste.

A Few Additional Observations

You may notice that the entire correspondence between the learners and the tutor(s) is about the grades awarded. The learners’ complain about ‘unjust’ grading, only after comparing their grades with those of their friends. Their complaints are emotional in nature rather than pedagogical. What is more significant is that the learner believes that
he/she is the best evaluator of his/her own performance (many learners have explicitly stated that grades they should have been awarded with are low).

On the other hand, most replies given by the tutors indicate how conventional they (i.e., the distance teachers) are in reacting to the learners’ queries. In some, their tempers flare up. In some others, the idea of the infallibility of the teacher is justified in many different ways. The obvious reason for such reactions from these distance teachers is that they had never really experienced or been prepared for the unique problems of distance teaching/learning.

Check Your Progress 2

**Notes:**

a) Space is given below for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

Compare the Replies given to Letter 3 in Category II. To what extent do they answer the learner’s question? What is your opinion of the tone of the ‘letter’ as well as the ‘replies’?

....................................................................................................................

....................................................................................................................

....................................................................................................................

....................................................................................................................

4.4 SUPPLEMENTAL INTERACTION: OFFERING ADDITIONAL SUPPORT TO LEARNERS

In this section, we shall be talking about issues which appear to be minor but are in fact significant and vital for distance education. However, we have restricted ourselves to mainly the following three issues:

i) tasks of a distance teacher;

ii) submission density of assignment responses; and

iii) tutorials.

We shall take up these issues in the same order as given above.

4.4.1 Tasks of a Distance Teacher

A distance teacher should be able to:

a) Motivate the distance learner to remain on the course, help him/her start again wherever s/he gets stuck because of some reasons—academic or non-academic;

b) Provide individualized guidance—each distance learner has to be approached and attended individually;

c) Provide feedback on learner’s performance and also on one’s success in the positive transfer and successful application of new learning;
d) Remove the sense of isolation which the distance learner is bound to suffer from and make him/her feel that s/he is one among many fellow learners, though s/he does not meet them often;

e) Stimulate independent and original thinking, problem solving and discovering knowledge; and

f) Help to develop appropriate attitudes towards the course materials, the institute, and one’s own needs and activities.

Certain prerequisites help the distance teacher fulfil his/her duties towards the distance learners. What are they?

- Distance teaching systems must find ways and means to enable the distance teachers and the learners to get to know each other, the usual state of anonymity in which the two groups work should be done away with.

- The system should provide for relatively frequent contacts (of course, through correspondence, telephone, etc. if possible), between the distance teachers and the learners. One way of making these contacts frequent is to increase the ‘submission density’, (we shall discuss this concept in Sub-section 4.4.2).

- Special steps may be taken to introduce ‘open’ assignments and also permit learners to raise ‘questions’ to be answered by the distance teachers. Such practices may make the academic exchanges between the distance teacher and the learner more stimulating, facilitate better insights, encourage independence of thought and the discovery of knowledge.

But do distance education institutions make efforts to provide the above mentioned ‘prerequisites’?

Very often distance education institutions do not take any steps to promote a purposeful acquaintance between the distance teacher and the learner.

Consequently, the two remain unknown to each other in many cases. If at all any closer contacts are developed, they are the result of an initiative taken by either the learner or the distance teacher. In such situations, at least the distance teacher must take the initiative to make his/her teaching more purposeful. There are distance education institutions in the West (for example in Denmark), where special measures are introduced to make such contacts a real possibility.

4.4.2 Submission Density of Assignment-Responses

Submission Density is a notion that indicates the relationship between the length of a course, be it in terms of pages or study hours, and the number of assignments that are to be worked through by a learner when on the course. For a given course, the larger the number of assignments to be worked through, the higher the “submission density” in that course. For example, if a particular course consists of four study units, each with one assignment, then the submission density is 4. Now, if the same course has eight assignments, the submission density will be 8, and if the course has sixteen assignments, its submission density will be 16.

The obvious point is that the larger the number of assignments to be submitted in a particular course, the larger are the number of occasions
Supplemental Interaction

of contact between the learners and the distance teacher, consequent upon which, the chances of the success of learners also are brighter.

There are some research studies which uphold this view, but, then, there are studies which do not support it. However, by and large, the distance learner, the distance institutions, and the distance teachers agree that the two-way communication generated by the work on assignments helps the learners in many ways:

i) Studies become more stimulating;

ii) Studies are better organized as the courses get divided appropriately;

iii) Learners are introduced to each other in the course;

iv) Learners build a closer acquaintance with the institution;

v) Learners are corrected where they might have gone wrong;

vi) Learning is reinforced through encouragement;

vii) Learning is applied to find out the solution of real and/or hypothetical problems;

viii) Significant parts of the course become clearly visible; and

ix) Revision of the course becomes easier.

At this stage we would like you to turn to course ES-311, and try to look for links between the views of Holmberg and Baath and the material presented in this block. By identifying the links, it will be easier for you to appreciate the four hypotheses which Holmberg has presented (claiming that whatever evidence is available, they have not been falsified yet).

- The stronger are the characteristics of guided didactic conversation, the better are the learners’ feelings of personal relationship between them and the supporting organization.

- The stronger are the learners’ feelings that the supporting organisation is interested in making the study matter personally relevant to them, the greater is their personal involvement.

- The stronger are the learners’ feelings of personal relations to the supporting organization and of being personally involved with the study matter, the higher is the motivation and the more effective is the learning.

- The more independent, scholarly and experienced are the learners, the less relevant are the characteristics of guided didactic conversation.

4.4.3 Tutorials

More than a century ago (in 1886 to be exact) Harper, the first proponent of correspondence education in the USA, said that “the correspondence teacher must be painstaking, patient, sympathetic and alive... Whatever a dead teacher may accomplish in the classroom, he can do nothing by correspondence... the man who does the work at all, must do it well”.

(Harper, 1971).
Similarly, there are thinkers who have differently emphasized the ability to encourage and inspire learners, the ability to visualize/imagine the difficulties and need of the learners, and the ability to like their own work as the attributes of good distance teachers.

To inspire the learners individually, a distance teaching institution naturally arranges for tutorials. A tutorial, among other things, means a period of individual instruction given by a college tutor. This definition implies that:

i) tutorials pertain to higher education (notice the use of the word ‘college’); and

ii) the objective of a tutorial is to provide ‘individual’ instruction to the learners.

Whether tutorials should be used only in the area of higher education is a question we are not interested in—we may use tutorials at lower levels of instruction too. What interests us is the second implication, i.e. the purpose of a tutorial is to provide ‘individual instruction’.

Without going into the details of how and when the system of tutorials came into being, we need to understand the importance of effective communication between the learner and the teacher. Effective communication is effected by:

i) allowing more time for individual interaction with the teacher;

ii) creating a more congenial academic atmosphere in which all types of learners find it convenient to express themselves; and

iii) providing for close relationships among the learners on one hand and between the learners and the teacher on the other.

The significance of these three processes can be appreciated better, if we look for structural and operational differences between the general academic processes that occur in a classroom and a tutorial. In a classroom situation the teacher addresses himself/herself to a group of 30 to 100 (in certain cases more than 100) learners, whereas a tutorial group may consist of about 10/12 learners. This basic difference between the two structures results in various operational differences between them. These are:

- The classroom teacher addresses himself/herself to a hypothetical average learner. The actual learners may be of much higher and/or lower cognitive abilities than this average learner. In a tutorial, on the other hand, the teacher will have to address himself/herself to each individual learner by making appropriate adjustments with the cognitive abilities of the latter. And the tutors will have to be more tolerant in order to accommodate all types of learner-abilities.

- Classroom teaching, in most cases, ends up as a process that is teacher-centered, (in general, learners remain passive most of the time) unidirectional (overt classroom interaction is neither possible nor usually encouraged), and impersonal (a teacher can not build personal relations with a large number of learners). The teaching and learning process in a tutorial can be learner-centered (if the teacher does not dominate the situation purposely), multi-directional (for every learner is made to contribute to the process) and intimate (as not only does the teacher come closer to learners, the learners also come closer to each other).
Supplemental Interaction

- Attitudinal problems which have their roots in learners’ and/or teachers’ biases, prejudices, inhibitions, idiosyncrasies, physical handicaps, up bringing or behavior, remain unresolved in classroom situations. But tutorial situations smooth out these problems to an appreciable extent.

What is obvious from the above analysis is that a tutorial ‘individualizes’ learning. On the one hand, it complements what is achieved in an impersonal way in the classroom situation, on the other; it also functions as a corrective operation. In distance education, the purpose of the classroom appears to be served by the study materials sent to the learners, and the purposes of the tutorial get served through the work on assignments. In fact, as each assignment has to be looked into as an individual academic exercise, the didactic conversation between the distance learner and the distance teacher is much more ‘individualized’ than the live tutorial can be.

Recently, computer-assisted distance tutoring was introduced at various places in the West. Such tutoring consists of the computer processing the answers written by the learners, and then preparing tutorial comments which are computer-printed, and passed on to the learner. Whatever evidence is available today, it appears that computer-comments work better than the traditional tutor comments. (Computers can, thus, lessen the heavy burden on distance teacher, and give them more time to work on ‘open’ assignments, which is also an advantage for the learners.)

Check Your Progress 3

Notes:  
a) Space is given below for your answer.  
b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

Point out at least two unique positive features in:

a) The classroom-tutorial system in conventional education, and
b) The two-way communication in distance education.

..........................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................

4.5 SUPPLEMENTAL INTERACTION THROUGH E-MAIL TOOLS

Supplemental communication is generally provided to the individual learner. It is a personal communication to a learner based on his/her queries on the course and the assignment-responses grades and further learning activities. These tasks may be carried by e-mail tools. This tool as a technological medium has the facilities of synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication. E-mail becomes synchronous when learner in one hand and tutor on the other hand are using the same portal for their communication. This communication sometimes turns into chatting mode. However, to avail this facility both the
Assessment of Learner Performance

Parties must have internet facilities. In the case of asynchronous communication, one leaves the message for others and, the respondent is able to open and read this message as and when he/she gets time to open the mail box. And, further communicates to the person who sends message to him/her. Thus, e-mail as one among the other technological tools helps in communicating between tutor and individual learner in supplemental communication.

Table-1 given below helps you to know about the e-mail tools and their various facilities in the context of supplemental communication.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Uses of e-mail tools in Supplemental Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Asynchronous Mode</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ Deals with complex issues when synchronous meetings cannot be scheduled because of work, family, and other commitments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ Students/tutors have more time to reflect because the sender does not expect an immediate answer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ Asynchronous mode allows more time to reply on a query or a complex issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ Student expected to reflect individually on course topics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ Students expected to share reflections regarding course topics and critically assess their peers’ ideas may be asked to participate on online discussions or a discussion board.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Supplemental communication, as argued by Haythornthwaite (forthcoming), is observed as three types:

- Content related
- Planning related
- Social support

These communications are held between a tutor and an individual learner, essentially to clarify learner’s doubts on certain issues pertaining to the learning activities and to give guidance to improve on their study skills. This is equally possible through technological medium also, and most specifically through e-mail tools.
Communication pertaining to the course contents is essential for learning which takes care of the content-related issues. Assistance to do the planning tasks on time, especially when learners produce some kind of product, such as assignment responses, practical lab works addresses the planning related issues. Social support issues deal with social relations among peers which is strongly desirable for mushrooming an atmosphere that fosters collaborative learning.

### 4.6 LET US SUM UP

As a confirmation of our discussion on the biases of a conventional teacher (see Units 1 & 3), in this unit we discussed:

- The complexities of distance teaching which even the supreme educational bodies such as the University Grants Commission, New Delhi could not visualize at initial stages, mainly because of lack of experience in offering education through a new mode;

- The consequences of forcing conventional teacher to function as distance teachers without examining whether or not they meet the prerequisites essential for distance teaching;

- The urgent need to radically change the polices that have been followed by the Correspondence Course Directorates all over the country; and

- The significance of supplemental communication in distance education, through assignment submission, tutor comments, contact-programmes etc. which can, and must compensate for the absence of regular face-to-face contact in a classroom situation.

### 4.7 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS


Koul, B.N. (1981). ‘Need for Professional Training in Distance Education’, Paper presented at the Regional Symposium on Distance Education, Penang, Malaysia.

4.8 FEEDBACK TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

QUESTIONS

Check You Progress 1

The assumption that a conventional teacher can function successfully as a distance teacher is untenable for the following reasons:

i) Teaching in a classroom is different from teaching distance learners.

ii) Writing, editing etc. of distance teaching materials cannot be managed in the same way that classroom lecture notes are prepared and edited.

iii) Evaluation methods and contact-programmes demand particular skills and approaches from a distance teacher which a conventional teacher need not have.

Check You Progress 2

Reply R3 (i) to Letter 3 does not answer the learner’s question at all. It is a quarrel with the learner, rather than an explanation to the query.

Reply R3 (ii) answers the question partially. It needs elaboration.

The tone of the letter is obviously rude and disrespectful.

Reply R3 (i) descends to the level of a street quarrel.

In reply R3 (ii) the first paragraph is ambiguous. It could be as seen being ‘friendly’ as well as ‘teasing’. The rest of the reply is a matter of fact.

Check You Progress 3

a) i) Classroom lectures, followed immediately by tutorials help learners to get answers and clarifications for their questions and problems without any delay.

ii) Everyday discussions which the learners may have with the teacher and with their peer group give them a deeper understanding of the subject.

b) i) Self-instructional materials cannot be casual in the way that lecture notes may be.

ii) Learners writing their assignment responses, and tutors marking the responses and commenting on them have to do a lot of hard thinking.