4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit aims at showing you how the NEW LEARNER is markedly different from the one who is a product of a rigid system of education.

By the end of this unit, you should be able to explain

- how 'learner autonomy' was denied in the educational systems of the past
- how it is effected in distance education to motivate the learners, to make the learning process simpler and more interesting, and
- how to democratise education

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In general, educational systems over the centuries have been indifferent to 'learner autonomy', notwithstanding the fact that seemingly all teaching/
learning processes primarily focus on the learners. Recent developments in science, technology and educational thinking fortunately attempt to resuscitate these withering educational systems by shifting the focus of emphasis from teaching to learning. By implication, more attention is now to be paid to learners and their needs than ever before.

And it is possible to see distance education in terms of this gradual evolution of the educational process as a whole. Seen thus, distance education or learning marks a transition from the more traditional concept of education that distinguished human society until about the onset of the Industrial Revolution. The new ideas implicit in science and technology, the new demands made by a somewhat more self-aware generation bred upon these ideas and the hitherto unknown possibilities opened up by the development of technology exerted a different kind of pressure upon the traditional system of education and gradually produced newer systems such as distance learning. Concomitantly, the role of a learner in distance education differs from that of his/her counterpart in the conventional educational system.

4.2 EDUCATION IN THE PAST: EUROPE

The content and the methodology of education in Europe have all along been the monopoly of the dominant social groups which tried to perpetuate their lines of thought and ways of life among the younger generations. In effect, the learners were brought up in a biased environment and learnt to live with prejudiced thoughts.

4.2.1 Greeks

That education must inform, guide and particularly, stimulate creativity was an unknown idea in ancient Greece. For the Greeks, the teacher gave the ‘eternal verities’ by means of discursive symbols to ‘empty vessels’. The teacher transplanted wisdom in the minds of students who were regarded largely passive and in need of such wisdom. Thus, the Greek trivium (grammar, rhetoric and dialectic) and quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music) were mainly a matter of studying certain patterns of words and systems.

4.2.2 Romans

The Greek system of ‘formal school’ was continued by the Romans who only expanded the number of citizens obtaining schooling. Knowledge became increasingly a matter of memorising and what was given to the student was a finished product which the student was required to take as final. Knowledge was not a mediation between the student and the world but the world itself as finally known and interpreted. This is typical of the traditional concept of education which prevailed in the western world until almost the 19th century.

This concept of knowledge built into an educational practice that regards knowledge as only an item for transference has been ridiculed as the
nutritionist concept of knowledge, according to which those who read and study do so to become ‘fat’ intellectuals. The validity of this concept was based on the fatuous assumption that knowledge is static and human consciousness empty, that the teacher could quench what was regarded as an appetite for understanding or hunger and thirst for knowledge.

4.2.3 Medieval Europe

This nutritionist concept of knowledge seemed to eminently suit medieval Europe from the sixth century onwards. Schools were run by churches and religious bodies. Schools were, by and large, monastic in order to train monks, priests and lay people. The curricular programme centred around the teaching of Christianity, although, after some initial resistance, the classics were included as part of the curriculum.

It would be more true to say that the history of education in the medieval age is the history of the educational role of the Church. The Church is an institution involved in history and it is distinguished by a definite ideology. The Church was primarily concerned about the propagation of Christianity and it therefore sought to produce an educational system and a view of morality that would make such propagation possible. The Church also supported a class structure which believed in a type of morality that was further reinforced by the traditional puritanical education imparted by the Church. To illustrate this point, let us consider the following two cases:

i) Morals

An emphasis on moral virtues as absolute and sacred and on the transcendental, as distinct from the mundane, resulted in an educational system that relegated to relative insignificance matters pertaining to more practical knowledge, to everyday living, to sex and to human relations. What was taught was only that which could be regarded as eternal and ‘elevating’ - rhetoric, mathematics, grammar, Latin, the classics and the Bible.

ii) Women

Women have traditionally been an oppressed class. This oppression is rooted in the paternal will to perpetuate the family system, which makes the woman as much a property, as possessions that can be inherited. Since inheritance is through the male line, greater value is attached to the male than to the female who is seen more as a necessity for procreation and for carnal pleasure.

Thus, the medieval system of education denied educational opportunity to women, although a more enlightened Church gradually emerged and recognised the right to education in the case of women. But a tradition that tied women to the home and kept them absolutely dependent on father and husband remained firm throughout the Middle Ages. Her existence being largely parasitic, the education of the female was not regarded a matter of any importance. Women were generally considered incapable of
understanding the subtleties of the arts and sciences.

A consequence of this was that education remained by and large the prerogative of men. This not only meant a denial of educational opportunities to women but also the fact that studies of women and their problems remained of peripheral interest. The educational system created male scholars who, having been brought up on the notion that the female is inferior, were not particularly interested in studying female psychology. The studies that did develop concerning women were largely oriented towards the male point of view and there was general agreement that women could not be regarded equal to men.

In the eighteenth century, for instance, some writers tried to prove that women had no immortal soul. And where women did succeed in making an impact, they only aroused further hostility. This is apparent in the emergence of women as actresses -- all actresses were generally the wives of actors -- and, although a few women gained prestige and rank, there was also a rise in the clamping down upon them of middle class morality with its rigid notion of chastity.

However, a few intellectuals championed the cause of women and pleaded for a more just system of education. It was argued that the lack of education among women was responsible for their supposed inferiority. The democratic and somewhat individualistic ideals that gradually developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did favour women in some ways.

Having briefly discussed the educational systems in ancient Greece, Rome and Medieval Europe, we now turn to what education meant to the East with a particular reference to ancient India.

### 4.3 EDUCATION IN THE EAST: THE CASE OF INDIA

The educational scene in ancient India was not different from the European scene in essentials, i.e. in being dominated by different social groups. Throughout the course of Indian history, the process of education was a means for perpetuating group-biases. We shall discuss them here.

#### 4.3.1 Brahminic education

Caste and religion played vital roles in the educational system of India. The *Guru* who taught in the *Vidya Ashrams* was always venerated and he generally belonged to the *Brahmin* caste which was considered the caste of God Almighty. Education in ancient India was geared to the caste system and was designed to perpetuate it. The *Sudras*, i.e. ordinary people, were denied access to education. This arose from the view that they were inferior and existed only for doing menial tasks.
Based on this belief, the Brahmins received training in the scriptures and learned to perform important religious rituals. They became teachers and contributed substantially to the strengthening of the caste system. A distinct ideological bias thus formed the core of the educational system in ancient India.

The system remained formal in which disciplines were clearly defined—the choice of which depended upon the accident of birth. Thus, the Kshatriyas (i.e. warriors), for example, received instruction in military techniques and polity as these were intrinsic to the specific duties of that class. The common methodology of learning not only included memorising, but also reflection after careful listening. There was also an insistence upon rhetoric, phonetics, grammar and the scriptures. All this tended to reinforce an exclusive reliance on and acceptance of scriptural authority.

4.3.2 Buddhist education

Buddhist education remained distinct from Brahminic education in so far as it provided educational opportunities to all castes, although it was centred mainly around monasteries. It was largely religious education, concerned with overcoming the demands of the flesh through meditation. Knowledge was conceived as a means of salvation. It thus provided a holistic ideal which demanded acceptance from each individual unlike the Brahminic system which insisted on acceptance of differing ideals on the basis of caste. In this sense, it is possible to view the Buddhist system as being more democratic.

4.3.3 Islamic education

Muslim domination over India produced Islamic educational institutions that were mainly divided into three categories: Maktab or primary education, higher Maktab and Madrassa or higher education. Maktabs were mostly attached to mosques and their main function was to preach religious piety and ritual.

4.3.4 Education in British India

The British established in India an educational system which can still be seen in operation. It is a system that was expected to produce an army of clerks and petty officials to carry on the colonial bureaucracy. Most students came from a select class of people who understood the English language and were sympathetic to the culture of the rulers. Education became divorced from life more than ever. Courses of study were narrow and mainly geared to prepare pupils for the civil service. There was very little technical or vocational education and the Indian languages fell into gross neglect.

Around 1860, the British attempted to establish universal education as part of their recognition of the Indians as equal partners. The model was the British system in which the university is the dominant institution. In order to give university education a greater intensity, the British divided the
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curriculum between secondary and university education. The admission test for university education gradually became the intermediate (also called the higher secondary) examination for which a separate Board was constituted.

4.3.5 Education in Independent India

Learning continues to be looked upon as a process distinct from working or earning a livelihood, although the two are now being seen as interlinked. A person spends a certain part of his/her life in learning and then proceeds to earn a livelihood. This formal concept of learning restricts education to a certain age limit and to a definite and recognisable student system governed by a set of rules and regulations that are biased towards providing education to a pre-conceived receiver and towards controlling the receiver with a formally understood system -- the traditional university.

And what is going to give a significant fillip to the growth and evolution of distance education is the emergence of a new concept of learning. Thus, distance education is obviously a radical departure from the past. It is a whole new way of learning and living.

4.4 CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING

The picture presented above points to gradual changes in the content and process of education as there have been individuals of outstanding abilities who jumped the limitations of their times and presented new ideas from time to time, and new practices found place by the side of old ones in the general development of educational thought and practice. Today we notice a NEW LEARNER emerging from the masses. This NEW LEARNER does not want to get into pre-conceived and pre-prepared educational strait-jackets. She/he is conscious of his/her wants, what suits him/her, what she needs, and will not simply accept what someone may offer him/her. This NEW LEARNER is the offspring of the changing, contemporary times, and is closely related to the new concept of learning.

The concept of learning that has evolved out of several contemporary developments -- including the growth of science, computer and information technology, psychology, etc. -- is infinitely wider. It is an extension of one’s awareness and, since such an extension is possible throughout one’s life, learning is limitless and cannot, in its amorphous richness and total range, be restricted to a formal system. In other words, learning is basically not formal. It is a non-formal activity and cannot, therefore, be brought under any normative restrictions.

However, learning has quite clearly a strong and undeniable subjective element. It plays the role of a change-agent which alters one’s notions and perspective: the reordering of one’s system of knowledge or an examination of one’s set of presumptions. At the same time, it is also the raising of one’s
The New Learner

It may impart skills -- linguistic, artistic, or practical. These, however, are secondary, though highly significant results of learning. From this point of view, it might be possible for us to say that in so far as the learner is concerned, the immediate meaning of learning is a modification of his/her consciousness, a growth in his/her awareness and a sense of achievement within his/her own subjectivity. But, because learning can and does result in the acquisition of new skills, it has become a valuable tool which can bring about significant changes in human behaviour.

4.4.1 Emphasis on the learner

Such a wide concept of learning places an emphasis on the learner rather than upon the teacher. It is the learner who is undergoing a primarily subjective transformation and hence the learning process is bound to be determined more by what the learner can take and how s/he can take it rather than by what the teacher has to offer him/her. The role of the teacher has to be seen as collaborative and as belonging to an existential situation in which he/she is an object to the learner’s subjectivity and can influence the process of learning only to the extent he/she can reach out to this subjectivity. Teaching may be thought of as a process of clearing the way, a kind of illumination. What is not quite visible is made visible through the process of teaching. It is like enabling the learner to see a reality that he/she had missed seeing earlier.

It is this that makes teaching such a tricky venture. It is perhaps the most vulnerable kind of human venture, precisely because it is subjected to the special needs and capabilities of the learner. Since all teaching and education has to reach out to the learner, the goals of teaching and education lie enmeshed in the psychology of the learner -- the motivation of the learner, and the kind of struggle he/she is capable of in determining the outcome of this mental battle. And what determines the motivation and the struggle of the learner is the challenges s/he faces in life and the kinds of experiences s/he encounters, and how much these may have shaken him/her out of his/her complacency. In other words, until the learner is prepared to learn, no learning can take place. It is the learner who, in actual terms, rules the roost and sets the conditions. S/he is the autonomous entity within the educational process.

The above concept is in keeping with the broad and universally accepted view that human beings are not empty vessels that can be merely filled in with knowledge. They have basic interests and work within tacit frameworks within which they structure experience. Above all, they have the ability to react in certain ways and to modify their awareness. It is these abilities that have to be reinforced by providing stimuli in the form of debates, discussions and other aids.

4.4.2 Equality: education for all

The above concept of learning is related to various developments in modern times. One way of looking at them is to take into account the idea of
equality that has begun to dominate discussions on education today. It has been part of a larger social movement towards greater democratisation which has resulted in an effort to provide education, especially higher education, to all. It is a move against the elitist concept of education which sought to limit its benefits to a select minority of people.

However, the idea of universal higher education for all is unrealisable in principle. The reason for this is that providing access to higher education to all, becomes in practice an empty provision, which is just not feasible. An equal right to education does not guarantee that each individual will receive the kind of education, or the duration of education that he or she needs. A whole spectrum of issues can be seen in the idea of equality in education. The full realisation of such an idea depends upon several factors. Some of which are:

i) to what extent does the kind of education being provided allow the learner to really benefit from it,

ii) the relevance of the educational content, and

iii) the flexibility of the system in terms of the constraints of time, place, etc., under which the learner functions and the ability of the ‘teacher’ or the learning programme to reach out to him/her.

In other words, equal access to education becomes meaningful when the system can be set up on the learners' terms, when educational programmes can be evolved to function for the learner and with a flexibility that permits the learner to pace his/her learning programme according to his/her convenience and needs.

Many persons have argued that an educational system that is truly flexible has to be conceived in rather large and social terms. It must implicitly assume a social set-up within which an effective learning programme is to be devised. In that sense, it has to move out and away from the classroom, which makes education a largely formal affair. It will have to form a genuine educational content, but, also be able to use the student’s needs and experience to generate new insights and to create new skills and competence. In other words, an educational system will have to begin by accepting that the experience or knowledge acquired by the learner has a definite intrinsic value and that it must become a necessary component of a learning venture.

4.4.3 Relevance of education in terms of learner-needs

From the point of view of what we have discussed so far, it should be clear that educationists must consider seriously the actual utility of the educational programme they are offering to a certain kind of learner or to a particular class of learners. And here one faces the enormous possibilities inherent in highly flexible programmes of learning. While learning must be relevant to the actual situation of the learner, this relevance is not something that can be absolutely defined. One might even be able to say that a course on toy-
The New Learner

making, for example, might serve a distinct purpose where it is designed to relieve boredom for urban populations whose lives have become tedious and full of routine. Similarly, an education that offers men and women an insight into their personal and emotional problems can be highly relevant. And yet an education that takes into account important social and economic needs and is the answer to a person’s basic quest for livelihood must soar, above all, in terms of relevance.

Check your progress 1

List the three factors that characterise the dictum ‘education for all’.

Notes: a) Write your answer in the space given below.

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

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4.5 DISTANCE EDUCATION - A REFORMATIVE MOVEMENT

What we have presented in section 4.4 forms an important argument for moving away from a total dependence on the formal educational system towards distance education. This must be regarded as a minimum programme of reform. It is this reform that must be seen in more comprehensive terms.

4.5.1 A minimum programme of reform

What distinguishes the formal system most, at the higher educational level for example, is the annual feature of students moving from one class to the next, in an attempt to secure degrees within the stipulated period of three years or so. This movement is mechanical and is hardly related to their actual
Socio-academic Issues

learning experience. The annual test is formal and takes into account what the student has been able to memorise and retain verbally. In some cases, such promotions from year to year have become automatic.

Shift of emphasis from teaching to learning

The rejection of the academic year of education or learning is the hallmark of distance education. In this system, the learner may learn a programme in more than one year, if he/she wants to, or he/she may pack more than one programme into one year of learning, if able to do so. This rejects the whole idea of a curriculum wedded to a fixed and inflexible time-dimension. The learner is free to take up a programme or even part of a programme and pace it according to his/her convenience. The emphasis obviously is neither on the course content, nor on the teachers, but on the design of the course and on its flexibility, i.e., the emphasis is more truly on the learner.

We must elaborate on the last sentence above. Any instructional strategy that is worthwhile must be based on an assessment of basic inputs needed to promote an educational programme. In the formal system, these consist of classrooms, blackboards and teachers. If these are to be rejected, what then will form significant inputs in distance education? These can be classed under three heads: textual materials; two-way interaction; and non-print aids.

The institution supplies the instructional materials to the learners who approach them with their abilities and experiences. Periodical evaluation through assignments or through interaction with a peer group or with fellow-students helps each student to self-learn by posing his/her problems and watching how others resolve theirs. And non-print aids such as audio-visual cassettes form the bulwark of teaching strategies, thanks to the development of modern communication technology.

Thus a system that de-emphasises teaching, but emphasises learning and makes the learner truly autonomous is both possible and desirable.

4.5.2 A tool for social transformation

Distance education is obviously a radical departure from the past. It is a whole new way of living and learning. The traditional concept of learning keeps learning tied down to the teacher, rather than to the learner. Knowledge or wisdom is transmitted from the teacher to the pupil. This view of learning permits minimal interaction between the learner and the teacher and cannot permit the process of learning that distance education visualises. Distance education strategies move inevitably towards a more secular view of education. In that sense, they are closer in spirit to modern science.

Just as science insists upon the criteria of validation which are based upon observations and experiments, so also the modern concept of learning calls for a validation of learning in terms of how it benefits the learner. It is the learner who becomes the final unit or entity that determines the entire system. The system is so contrived and so distributed as to satisfy the consumer who, in this case is the learner. Distance education can be viewed
as a significant device that attempts to raise the actual educational attainment of adult (and not so adult) populations of a civilised society without insisting upon any formal requirements. It does this by enunciating a more valid meaning of learning and incorporating it within a carefully constructed set of strategies that are distinguished by their flexibility, and by the fact that they accord to the learners the freedom to set their own pace and thus recognise their autonomy. It facilitates the free communication of knowledge.

Such a free communication of knowledge will obviously involve two things. One is a constant revision of what constitutes knowledge, and the other is the basic appeal to rationality that such communication implies. Knowledge that is truly effective must be relevant. This indicates that there is nothing final or sacrosanct about any piece of knowledge, and so about any course that might be devised. Courses will have to be constantly screened, and additions and alterations made. Such monitoring will also enable a gradual elevation of courses and result in more and more advancements. There will have to be an incessant endeavour to cross the intellectual or cognitive threshold, assuming that there is one.

Furthermore, while the learners are being treated as autonomous, they are being, at the same time, viewed as persons whose reason is sufficiently developed. The very fact that learners make a conscious choice with regard to their courses of study shows them to be capable of making a rational choice and being able to evaluate the relevance of what they are studying. They are in that sense responsible persons who possess certain definite moral and personal qualities.

Check your progress 2

Give two examples to show how learner autonomy is practised in distance education.

Notes: a) Write your answer in the space given below.
    b) Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

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Socio-academic Issues

From the foregoing discussion it should be clear that the autonomy of the learner must have a special meaning in distance education. What distance education in effect does is to let the learners think for themselves and so take full possession of all they are capable of. Such capability is specially important because it seems to (more authentically) result in the learners’ realising their own merit. Needless to say, the value of reason finds particular emphasis in any distance education programme.

Distance education can be seen therefore as a powerful and potent means of social change which could bring about a more reasonable society of human beings. By according autonomy to the learner, it becomes a part of an integral movement towards the general advancement of reason.

Of course, what has been said so far may be circumscribed by a more precise rule. Not every learner can exercise autonomy, however desirable that may be. Some learners might need more guidance than others.

The ‘autonomy’ dimension of distance education cannot be measured with any real accuracy. Obviously, this calls for evolving a system that will provide direction where it is needed. This can be done by more precisely enunciating the objectives of distance education. It is only when the learner is able to formulate his/her learning objectives that he/she will be able to exercise more autonomy and learn easily and well.

Thus, some kind of preparatory activity or session may be necessary. Different ways and means can be identified. For example, a questionnaire may be used to elicit information on the basis of which such preparatory activity could be conducted. Alternatively, the student could be asked to go through a certain book or watch a film in order to be better prepared to benefit from distance education. These are the actual modalities that will have to be considered in order to introduce a truly effective distance education programme. They are important and will ultimately pave the way not only for autonomy in learning but also perhaps for autonomy in evaluation.

What has been suggested is that though the NEW LEARNER is becoming more and more conspicuous and articulate day by day, s/he needs help to identify himself/herself and his/her needs clearly and that the educational system has to evolve ways and means for meeting this requirement.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

The following are the main points we dealt with in this unit:

i) Educational systems in the past were basically sectarian in nature.

ii) Education was restricted to certain dominant social groups.

iii) The learners were treated as passive agents who had no active role to play in the overall teaching and learning process.

iv) New developments in socio-political thought, educational thinking and
technology have shifted the focus of attention from the teacher to the learner.

v) We experience the emergence of the ‘autonomous learner’ - the NEW LEARNER - and our assertion is that his/her needs can best be met through the agency of DISTANCE EDUCATION.

Check Your Progress: Possible Answers

1 The three factors that characterise ‘education for all’ are

   a) the relevance of educational content to objectives.
   b) the flexibility of the educational system.
   c) the benefit that learners get from the kind of education being provided to them.

2 a) There are no time-constraints. In other words, the learner is allowed to learn, cover a programme in more than one year, if s/he wants to and may complete more than one programme within one year of learning if s/he is able to do so. Thus, the learner is allowed to proceed at his/her own pace.

   b) Distance education allows a learner to make a rational choice with regard to his/her course of study. By implication, it shows that this mode of teaching and learning does not treat the learner as a ‘passive’ agent. On the contrary it considers him/her a person whose reason is sufficiently developed to become an active partner in the process of learning and teaching.
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Note: The discussions on Mauritius and West Indies are partly based on the information supplied by our M.A. graduates in Distance Education, Roshun Dhurbarylal and Elaine M. Olliverre respectively.
Dear Student,

While studying the units of this block, you may have found certain portions of the text difficult to comprehend. We wish to know your difficulties and suggestions, in order to improve the course. Therefore, we request you to fill out and send us the following questionnaire, which pertains to this block. If you find the space provided insufficient, kindly use a separate sheet.

**Questionnaire**

Enrolment No. □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

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3. Any other comments:

Mail to:
Course Coordinator (ES-311)
STRIDE, IGNOU, Maidan Garhi
New Delhi – 110068, India.