
UNIT 3 CURRICULUM: ISSUES AND TRENDS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

After having gone through the unit, you should be able to:

- explain some of the important curricular issues with particular reference to distance education;
- describe the various ideological under currents that shape the curricular pattern;
- outline some important curricular trends in distance education in different societies; and
- identify crucial factors for developing curricula for non-conventional courses in the Third World countries.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

We are now familiar with differing approaches to curriculum theory, curriculum development, its implementation. We are also aware that there is/ can be no single approach to curriculum planning, implementation, etc. We suggested that different interpretations of curriculum as a concept, and various ways of building curriculum theory, emanate from the different philosophical premises on which educationists base, defend and propagate their views and theories about education in general.

Curricular issues related to distance education are many and they differ from those related to the curriculum usually designed for the face-to-face set up. Distance education curriculum, because of its inherent tendency to be innovative, faces new issues, both theoretical and practical. At the theoretical level, we need to give careful thought to the pedagogical soundness of a proposed curriculum for a particular educational programme i.e., its feasibility, its actual implementation and evaluation and at the level of practice, we sought to consider strategies and devices which are essential to make our curricula effective and successful.

Keeping this in view, in this Unit, we shall look at important issues which usually confront the curriculum developers working for distance education and indicate their implications for educational programmes offered through the distance mode. We shall also consider some of the important trends in distance education which call for new approaches to curriculum. Apart from the already existing curricula for established disciplines like Chemistry, Economics etc. there are areas such as Adult Education, Continuing Education, Workers Education, etc., which offer a variety of educational programmes through non-conventional means. By implication, distance education primarily concerns itself with the development of curriculum for new educational trends. It assumes the responsibility of altering and modifying the curricula meant for conventional academic and professional courses, with a view to facilitating the learning process of distance learners of different categories.

3.2 CURRICULAR ISSUES RELATED TO DISTANCE EDUCATION

When we discuss the curricular issues and trends we should always remember the socio-political and cultural contexts in which they are viewed, the philosophical and pedagogic bases suggested and the ideological implications they hold for us. They are necessary, if we are to approach the common curricular issues in their specific contexts and in a concrete manner. Although the curriculum for distance education has to face new issues from time to time, there are certain fundamental issues which are common to any educational programme developed at a distance teaching institution. We have taken up the following four such issues for discussion:

- i) Instructional issues,
- ii) Discipline-based issues,
- iii) Individual-based curriculum, and
- iv) Relevance-based issues.

3.2.1 Instructional Issues

Instructional issues related to curriculum for distance education can be viewed at various levels, but mainly at the theoretical and practical levels. At the theoretical level, the principles behind various theories of learning and the concept of curriculum as such influence curriculum planning. At the practical, or pragmatic, level the list of instructional issues grows increasingly lengthier as we have to consider them at various stages, such as course planning, course production, media selection, student support services, evaluation, feedback system, etc.

Let us take up the instructional issues pertaining to curriculum for distance education at the theoretical level.

Theoretical level

The major theories of learning we are familiar with are the following:

- Behaviourism,
- Cognitive Psychology, and
- Eclecticism.

As we studied in Unit 2, Block 1, our choice of methods of teaching, and our decisions about strategies to implement a given curriculum, will depend on the learning theory we follow. This is so because each learning theory differs from the other in its outlook about the relationship between man and the world, its approach to the learner as well as the teacher and the entire teaching-learning process. The curriculum planner who subscribes to a particular world-view and a theory of learning, perceives the whole process of developing, implementing, etc. of curriculum on the basis of his/her understanding of the philosophical premises of the pedagogy (science of teaching) and andragogy (art of facilitating adult learning) chosen.

Let us elaborate on this by touching upon each of the learning theories we have mentioned above.

Behaviourism: This theory was derived from the experiments conducted on animals, birds and children and operates on the principle of ‘stimulus-response’ though, useful in many ways in developing programmes and instructional materials. Behaviourism completely ignores the role of the human mind in the learning process. Further it relies mainly on the biological behaviour of the learner which is conditioned or manipulated by the instructor or the teacher. This theory implies that:

- i) the teacher has absolute control over the learner, and
- ii) it insists on observed and observable behaviour
- iii) the learner does not really have a choice as to what to learn and how, since behaviour is controllable.

Cognitive psychology: Cognitive psychology, in contrast with behaviourism, places the human mind at the centre of the learning process. It implies that the learner’s behaviour cannot be equated with that of an animal and the process of learning is based on conscious effort rather than a biological response to external stimuli. Since the days of the German **Gestalt** psychologists of the 1920s up to the present, developments in the cognitive approach to learning have emphasised the primacy of the mind. In other words, the learner has been consistently upheld as the most crucial element in the process of learning by educationists who advocated cognitivism. (The humanist approach too by emphasising the conscious **element** in the learning process supports the idea of developing human qualities along **with** skills in learners).

Eclecticism: The eclectic approach freely makes use of all **the** workable principles from any theory and Gagne’s eight types of learning could be cited as a good example of pragmatism which avoids all conflicts and controversies that arise from conflicting philosophical positions from which different pedagogical theories contend with each other.

It may appear to be ‘safe’ to be a pragmatist in the sense Gagne is. But don’t you think that it is better to be aware of the actual differences among various theories? This will help us approach curricular issues from a position of strength and understanding and prevent vague and naive use of borrowed theories.

In essence, we can think of two important implications these theories of learning have for curriculum development in the context of distance education. They are:

- i) curriculum developers who are more inclined towards behaviourism tend to ignore the role of learners and, therefore, move towards a controlled and bureaucratic type of curriculum; and
- ii) those who choose the eclectic approach, or to certain extent the cognitive approach, emphasise the need to allow the learner a degree of freedom in deciding what and how he/she wants to learn.

To reiterate, the nature of a curriculum, whether democratic or otherwise, would depend on the philosophical orientation of the curriculum developer and the institution..

Having gone through the instructional issues at the theoretical level, we shall now take up those at the pragmatic level.

Pragmatic level

At the practical, operational level, we need to consider the strategies of teaching and the support services necessary for the distance learner to learn without facing any major hurdles. While deciding on the strategies of teaching, we have to pay sufficient attention to course design, text design and the choice of media. The heaviness of the content in the package, the mode of presentation of the content, the format of the text, the audio-visual materials, etc., should be considered. Such a consideration will naturally take us to the question of media choice, whether to offer a course through only one medium or to adopt a multi-media approach will be decided in accordance with the availability of resources—financial, technological and human. Besides, the validity and educational effectiveness of the media should also be considered on the basis of sound pedagogic/andragogic reasons. Some of the questions that we should consider at the operational level before we develop and launch new courses through the distance mode are:

- What percentage of material should be given through which medium?
- What types of assignments—tutor marked or computer marked or both?
- What will be the weight of assignments in the overall assessment and the evaluation procedure?
- What should be the turn around time in receiving assignment-responses, assessing them and returning them to the students?
- What kind of help can the tutor offer the students?
- What could be the ways and means of getting feedback from students and how effective would the feedback mechanism be?
- How often should there be face-to-face meetings between the student and the tutor?
- Are the facilities provided by study centres accessible to the student?

It is possible that each of these questions can be broken down into further smaller questions. But for our immediate purposes, we shall stop here.

Having looked into instructional issues, let us now talk about issues pertaining to disciplines. Before we do so, please work on this exercise.

Check Your Progress 1

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer

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

State in about 8 lines the basic differences between the behaviourist and cognitivist schools of thought and the electric approach.

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3.2.2 Discipline-based Issues

Curricular issues become more specific when we take up the cases of individual disciplines. Both at the theoretical and operational levels, considerations differ depending on the nature of the discipline. For example, even if we adopt the same set of principles—say the principles of behaviourism—in evolving curricula for Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences, the application of these principles shall necessarily differ from discipline to discipline. The way in which a set of behaviourist principles operate for a curriculum in Science, for instance, will be different from the way they operate in Humanities or Social Sciences.

Obviously, different considerations of curricular issues at the practical level become inevitable, because different disciplines make different kinds of demands on us. While planning the curriculum for Science, for instance, we have to start with an assessment of the basic infrastructural facilities necessary for the practice and success of science programmes. Moreover, the importance to be given to the theoretical and practical components of science subjects will be decided on the basis of a consideration of the availability of adequate laboratory facilities, scientific equipment, face-to-face contacts of students, etc. However, all these sources may not necessarily be available in every situation.

From the students' point of view, we should consider whether or not students will be in a position to utilize the infrastructural facilities even if they are available. Students may have difficulties in using them because of:

- problems in using a specific component such as home kits for conducting experiments; and
- handling newly acquired scientific equipment or using the most advanced technology and media such as computer simulations, video conferencing, etc.

Besides, students may also have difficulties in collecting, incorporating and using the needed data to develop a coherent body of knowledge and a comprehensive understanding of the subject concerned from their studies and experiments.

In the case of curricula for Humanities and Social Sciences, there may be no issues pertaining to practicals. But, here again, the very choice of curriculum

content, methods of presentation and teaching, points of view in interpreting the content chosen etc. will pose a number of pedagogical/andragogical and ideological problems. For instance, we have to approach subjects like Literature, Languages, Economics, Political Science, History, Sociology and Philosophy with a lot of flexibility and ideological tolerance, as we have to maintain a reasonable degree of objectivity. However, the least we could expect from a democratic curriculum is to make provision for presenting a variety of views on a given subject/theme. A free play of ideas and interpretations would, then, allow the students to make an informed choice among the possible approaches, interpretations, views, etc., while studying a subject. If we are aware of these issues we can easily anticipate the problems related to each discipline/subject and think of possible solutions to them in order that the effective implementation of the curriculum concerned may be ensured. Overlooking them will make even the most well intended curriculum ineffective and narrow.

We are now aware that depending on the nature and thrust of different disciplines/subjects, differing considerations have to be looked into. One major consideration, besides discipline based ones is the student for whom a course is prepared. Traditionally, the focus has been, and to certain extent, still is, on disciplines/subjects. Because, of the shift in educational emphasis globally the focus is now legitimately on the learner and this brings us to a discussion of individual-based curriculum.

3.2.3 Individual-based Issues

Because due to the change in educational thinking, learner autonomy has gained currency. And, one of the strong points of distance education is that it promises to allow individuals to choose the courses/programmes they want. The concept of independent study or learner autonomy derives its strength partly from the flexibility of the distance education curriculum itself. The curriculum for distance education therefore, has to take into account a variety of individual needs, the different learning styles and the study habits of students. It should also allow individualised learning in geographical, sociological and pedagogical/andragogical terms. In essence, distance education should allow students living in different geographical locations (e.g., urban, rural, remote areas), irrespective of their social status, to take the courses they need. Time is another important factor in this regard. The time frame envisaged for the completion of a course should be reasonably flexible so that the students who may have to disrupt their studies because of social, domestic or professional commitments can continue their studies whenever they get time to do so. However, this aspect of flexibility, as you might be aware, should not be interpreted in absolute terms.

There are sociological and pedagogical/andragogical constraints on any educational system, however, flexible it may strive to be. Flexibility of a curriculum in distance education should be interpreted only in realistic terms. It is flexible in so far as it allows the freedom to individuals to have access to educational programmes which can meet their specific needs—academic, professional or intellectual.

Let us elaborate.

Suppose there is a medical practitioner who wants to know about the latest developments in a particular branch of medicine or an economist who wants to do a course in Statistics or Mathematics. In both the cases, you can see the specific needs which are individual-based. They may not like to acquire the specific information or knowledge by joining courses which make it obligatory for them to study a certain number of topics in addition to the one which they actually want to study. The very structure of conventional curriculum prevents

isolation of specific topics or themes from the overall framework. Distance education curriculum can provide precisely this facility by isolating specific topics/areas of knowledge and offering individual courses on those areas.

For this purpose, we need to conduct surveys to identify the areas where individual based courses/programmes would be feasible. Surveys conducted on the basis of representative sampling, the findings and conclusions arrived at after the analysis of data collected will enable us to decide on the nature of needs and the possibility of developing courses to meet those needs. Individual-based curriculum should also consider the flexibility of such courses in terms of cost, logistics, etc. After deciding on the flexibility of developing an individual-based curriculum, we have to consider the objectives of the learner, their preferred learning methods and the modes of evaluation. Some may just want to get the information; others may need certification; a few would like to take the examination whenever they are ready for it. Consideration of such issues will influence the final outcome of individual-based curriculum.

Having looked into the three different curricula and their demands, we shall now talk about the last one, i.e., relevance-based issues.

3.2.4 Relevance-based Issues

Even a curriculum which was very useful and effective at one time may become absolutely irrelevant if it does not respond to the new needs of individuals and the society. The relevance and the irrelevance of curriculum, therefore, are closely related to the needs of individuals as well as the society. The truism that with the changing times, educational needs also change only emphasises the need to review, revise or change the curricula. Sometimes even the most updated and complete curriculum could also become irrelevant, if it does not suit the needs and interests of the learners. This is usually seen in the combining of diverse subjects under a single programme. Suppose you want to specialise in the area of theoretical Physics, but you are asked to do Mathematics and Chemistry too in order to gain a degree in Physics. Unless the need for a particular combination of subjects is proved valid, the curriculum because of its fixed nature may not motivate the student. In a situation where schools/colleges teach subjects which contain outdated information, curriculum becomes a bottleneck for the acquisition of knowledge. On the other hand, new curricula which are yet to gain social recognition and acceptability may end up producing students with newly acquired skills and knowledge but with no employment prospects.

Do you visualise any problem that a distance education institution may face in this regard?

Distance teaching institutions may face the following two major problems in this regard:

- i) The institutions, which offer a rehash of the curricula designed for traditional institutions, will not allow any flexibility in the case of course combinations. For example, most programmes offered by distance education directorates/ departments attached to various universities in India are yet to find a solution to this problem.
- ii) The institutions, because of their enthusiasm to be innovative may develop curricula for unconventional courses without realising their long-term implications. A course developed to satisfy temporary needs of a small group of people will soon invalidate the rationale as soon as students stop registering for the course. Thus possible duration or life of the course must be one of the factors to be considered in deciding on the relevance of the curriculum concerned.

Check Your Progress 2

*Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.
b) Check your answer with the one given at the end of the Unit.*

Write a note on the need to ascertain the relevance of a curriculum in the Distance Education mode.

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3.3 CURRICULUM AND IDEOLOGY

The wide ranging discussions and debates on curriculum (concept, theory, content, etc.), and disputes on adopting particular theories of learning, the relevance and validity of offering programmes on particular themes, the motives and intentions behind the methodologies and strategies to teach the subjects concerned, etc., may, at first, leave us with a sense of bewilderment and, at times, frustration. This is so partly because of the usual human tendency to state even the simplest truth in the most abstract language and partly because of the complexity of the subject which makes the use of abstract language and new terminology unavoidable.

However, it is not difficult to see the differences among the approaches of educationists in concrete terms and seek answer(s) to the question ‘why such differences?’, when all the educationists concerned seem to be talking about the same subject: education! The key to the answer(s) to the problems we have identified here is to relate the theoretical and philosophical views of educationists to their concrete, material, socio-political-cultural contexts, of which education is only a part. Curricular and pedagogical issues are based on definite ideologies and world views held by educationists, although it is possible that some of the educationists may be quite unaware of them. It is in this context that a discussion on ideology in relation to curriculum becomes necessary.

3.3.1 Ideology and Education

Ideology is inevitable in life, including education. Educators may not be conscious of the ideological base in which they are being governed, but certainly ideology, as a sphere of thought, guides their actions. It therefore operates at various levels of developing and implementing curriculum.

Liberal ideology: Western democracies stick to the ideology of freedom of the individual which implicitly believes in the correctness and fairness of an individual’s choice. In all spheres of life one has to face the consequences of one’s choice. If you can cope with the demands of a particular course, for example, it is your individual effort and determination that ensure your success. On the contrary if you find it too difficult to complete the course or you are tied down to your domestic or social commitments and, therefore, cannot cope with the course, once again it is up to you to continue or to give up the course. In either case, you have the freedom to choose. This, in short,

is the essence of liberal ideology that has shaped the curricula of many of the distance teaching institutions of the West.

Socialist ideology: The socialist or Marxist ideology, on the other hand, holds the view that it is the overall socio-cultural environment and the political policies of the state that determine the success or failure of educational programmes. Although individual effort and determination are necessary to achieve educational goals, it is imperative on the part of society or the state to ensure basic facilities and equal opportunities so that individuals and society as a whole could benefit from education. The emphasis here is on society rather than the individual. The socialist ideology suggests that the development of each individual is dependent on the overall development of society.

Ideology of the developing countries: It seems to be difficult for the developing countries to clearly spell out their ideology. But the essential aspects of education in the developing countries show that their ideology is closer to the liberal or individualist ideology than to the socialist one. However, the terminology used by the educationists in the developing countries usually gives the impression that they are socialists. This lack of clarity about their ideology as well as their educational goals emanates from the very material reality of their position vis-a-vis the developed western, and the socialist, countries. Because of their erstwhile colonial status, the developing countries want to free themselves from the influences of the former colonisers and, therefore, look to socialist/welfare state ideology. And because of their urge to catch up with the developed countries they shape their political, economic and educational institutions on the Western models. The very choice of the educational philosophy and the mode becomes tinted ideologically, and there is no way to get away from it—other than perhaps recognizing it and understanding the implications of such an ideological choice. The impact of this crisis of ideology in the developing countries, i.e., a midway between liberalism and socialism, is nowhere felt with such clarity as in the field of education. A UNESCO report on Education The World Over States:

“Serious anomalies appear where the educational system has been set up only recently, and is copied from foreign models-usually the case in developing countries. When they emerged from the colonial period, the Third World countries flung themselves whole-heartedly into the fight against ignorance, which they quite rightly viewed as the most important condition for lasting liberation and real development. They believed that it would be enough to snatch the instrument of technical supremacy, as it were, from the colonisers hands. They have now become aware that these models (often obsolete, even for the people who devised them), are adapted neither to their needs nor to their problems. Their investments in education have become incompatible with their financial possibilities. The production of graduates is greater than the capacity of their economics to absorb them, giving rise to unemployment among certain groups, the drawbacks of which are not confined to that of unprofitability; it also causes psychological and social damage which is so extensive that it is jeopardising the balance of society. Since it is out of the question for those concerned to give up one of their fundamental aspirations for which they have sacrificed so much, suffered and fought, an agonizing reappraisal becomes necessary (UNESCO, 1973).

Perhaps the case has been stated in a mild and non-controversial manner: In many a developing country it is not merely a ‘failure’ to adopt a correct model but also a failure to resolve the ideological conflicts of different control groups which shape and implement the curricula in the developing countries.

The views of liberal democracy, primitive and progressive ideologies often contend with each other. Because of their rare access to the governing bodies of educational institutions, the socialist ideologists have little say in shaping the curricula and their influence on curriculum is only marginal. The real contention is often between the first two categories: liberal ideology and primitive thinking. Quite often the liberals compromise with the feudal elements and the result is what you saw in the excerpt from the UNESCO report.

Curriculum, in the context of distance education, is influenced by ideological issues in at least four major aspects: theory, development, implementation and evaluation. Further elaboration is in order here.

3.3.2 Ideology at the Pedagogic/Andragogic Level

Every educational activity comprises a two way process; teaching and learning. Curriculum is a systematic organisation of requisite components of an educational programme. At the very beginning of the process of planning and developing a curriculum, we have to consider the wider significance of the pedagogical/andragogical, political, economic and practical aspects involved. Such a consideration has fundamental significance to the success or failure of any given curriculum.

At the pedagogic/andragogic level, the well known theories of learning influence the curriculum developers in one way or the other. Since distance education is recognised as learner-centred education, it becomes all the more important to consider the pedagogical/andragogical principles which guide the development and implementation of its curricula for its various educational purposes. Some of them which matter in this context are:

- the behaviourist approach
- the cognitive approach
- the eclectic approach
- the humanistic approach and
- the dialectical materialist approach

The first four approaches are being followed in one form or the other in curricula developed by educational institutions which place the improvement of the individual at the centre of their educational activities. The fifth one i.e., the dialectical materialist approach is supposedly followed by the developers of socialist curricula. There are enormous differences among the first four approaches in their attitudes towards teaching and learning and their emphasis on particular processes thereof. However, what is common is the ideology that governs all these four approaches.

We have already discussed the first three approaches in the earlier sections with their ideological and pedagogic implications. Here we shall discuss the implications of the last two approaches in that order.

Ideology of humanistic approach

As a reaction to the total neglect of the human mind in the learning process came the humanistic approach which places the thinking faculty of the human being, i.e., the human mind, at the centre of the learning process. The most significant contribution of humanistic approach is that it refuses to equate human behaviour with animal behaviour and recognises the ability of the human mind to question the knowledge it receives and refuses to take in what it does not want or need.

This approach effectively counters the behaviourist tendency to see learning as more a biological activity than the conscious thinking activity of the mind. However, the humanistic approach too emphasizes the individual's well-being and inter-personal relationships, over the social aspect/approach.

Ideology of dialectical materialist approach

The dialectical materialist approach or the Marxist approach looks at education as social process. At the philosophical level it recognises the existence of the objective world independent of the mind. Human beings, as historically evolved biological beings acquire learning by interacting with nature. This interaction between the objective world and the human mind is the basis of all learning. As social beings, individuals develop their mental faculties and acquires skills through interaction with other members of their society and by participating in the productive process of the society in one way or the other. The nature of education in a given period of time, in a given society, is conditioned by the prevalent mode of production.

For example, education in a feudal society is characterised by its conformity to the feudal mode of production with its support of monarchy, church, religion and a relatively stable hierarchy of social classes: the lords, the priests and artisans and the serfs. Education under modern industrial capitalism, with its free trade, free competition, free enquiry, individual freedom etc. as its goals, gives up the religious dogma, and encourages secular thinking. It introduces new disciplines of learning in place of theology, logic, rhetoric, etc., and demands acquisition of specialised skills to meet the ever increasing needs of the division of labour required by modern industry, science and technology.

It must be clear now that 'the dialectical materialist approach' to curriculum, places overall social growth and well being as the basis of the free development of individuals. While recognizing the need for specialised skills, new disciplines, etc., it also emphasises the need for a general education which would inculcate social, human and ethical values in human beings, besides imparting knowledge and skills to them. The most important aspect of this approach is that it holds that education or curriculum cannot be free from class interests in a class based society. It believes that the ideology of the ruling class dominates the curricula of any educational system, sometimes overtly, and often covertly. Thus the curriculum of the educational system of a capitalist society aims at safeguarding the interests of the capitalist class and that of socialist education aims at the well-being of the working class, which would, presumably, eventually lead to a classless society.

What are the implications of ideologies for curriculum development? We shall try to answer this question in the following subsections.

3.3.3 Implications: Ideologies and Curriculum

The ideological implications of the approaches to learning, which we have talked about in Sub-sections 3.2.1 and 3.3.2, are significant. An awareness of the ideological positions of different approaches to learning would help us place curriculum more or less clearly in the overall social context.

To create such an awareness, it is necessary that we ask questions of the following types and examine them from time to time:

- What do we mean by 'adults'? Are they grown up members of a society in general, or those who did not get education at an earlier stage?
- What sort of education and in what proportion needs to be given to them, and by what means?

- If a curriculum for women’s education is called for, who would design it for which section(s) of women and with what objectives?
- If the tribal people are to be educated and brought into the ‘mainstream’ of national life, who should decide on their educational needs and how?

You could perhaps think of a few more questions to add to the list given.

Let us pause here for a minute while you do this exercise.

Check Your Progress 3

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

We have studied several ideologies corresponding to different curriculum approaches. Write about the ideology of the dialectical-materialist approach.

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3.4 CURRICULAR TRENDS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

We can safely assume that curricular trends in distance education necessarily run parallel to the emerging trends in distance education. The four important developments which influenced distance education to in the 1960’s were:

- i) adult education,
- ii) workers education,
- iii) educational broadcasting and media technology, and
- iv) research in the processes of teaching and learning.

The recent trends in distance education which call for new approaches to curricula include, among others, the following:

- Mass/community education,
- National development, and
- Rural development.

Having identified the trends in distance education, we shall talk about their overall impact on curriculum with reference to developed and developing countries.

3.4.1 Distance Education Curriculum: Three Worlds

Curriculum for distance education takes various shapes and assumes quite differing significance depending on the social context in which it is developed. Its forms and content are determined by national and social conditions, the

world over. Let us now briefly look at the three general trends of curriculum in distance education in the developed countries, developing countries, and the socialist countries.

Distance Education Curriculum: Developed Countries

In the UK, open education is a second chance for those adults who did not get the opportunity for higher education at the right time. Its aspiration thus is to improve the status and quality of adult education, to give education to those adults who were actually ignored, for whatever reason by formal and elitist curricula of the established educational institutions. In the USA, distance education curricula focussed on the technical and training needs of industrial workers and armed forces. Besides new curricula for the disadvantaged sections of the population like the disabled etc., received considerable attention from distance educators. The practice takes place even today.

Distance Education Curriculum: Experiences of Socialist Countries

In the socialist countries, distance education curricula took a very different turn in producing courses which could combine production, general and specialised education. Curricula for polytechnical education in the socialist countries together with the curricula for work peasants and soldiers concentrate as much on ideological and political education as on technical knowledge and skills. The harmonious development of human personality—whether one is a worker or a specialist or a student—has been the chief concern of the curricula in these countries. The relatively younger members of the socialist world such as People's Republic of China, Vietnam, Cuba and Nicaragua aspired to catch up with the developed countries of any socio-political system and, therefore, the distance education curricula in these countries gave more importance to training personnel who directly take part in economic production and scientific technological advancement. It should be a matter of great interest to see what changes may now come about in the curricula of these countries.

Distance Education Curriculum: Developing Countries

In developing countries the broad aim has been national development. This broad aim, however, implies a number of areas where new programmes/courses are to be planned and developed. Some of the areas which need unconventional curricula are:

- mass or community education;
- literacy-oriented education;
- general health education;
- women's education;
- food, nutrition and child care;
- functional education;
- tribal education;
- rural development;
- water management; and
- vocational education.

The very nature of the curricula, for it to meet even the basic requirements of educational programmes in the above-mentioned areas, pre-supposes the availability of enormous resources—human, financial, technical, etc., expertise, and above all, political will.

Keeping this in view, now, let us see in some detail how the distance education curricular trends in different social-geographical contexts have emerged or have been emerging.

Check Your Progress 4

*Notes : a) Space is given below for your answer.
b) Check your answer with the one given in the end of the unit.*

State the broad aim of Distance Education in the third world and the basic requirement to achieve this aim.

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3.4.2 Emergence of Adult Education

Note here that for our immediate purposes we shall restrict ourselves to a discussion of adult education in the UK. Adult education in 19th century Britain was the product of the working class movements and trade union activities. Academics connected with established formal educational institutions moved out of their ivory towers to reach the educationally disadvantaged sections of the people. Naturally, they had to think of a curriculum which would be suitable to the day-to-day needs of the common people who could not have access to the elitist education which essentially aimed at perpetuating the interests of the upper class, middle class and the other privileged sections of the British society. Curriculum for adult education, thus, focussed on the economic, social and political rights of the common people in general and the workers in particular.

Adult education in Britain, despite the good intentions of and efforts by Workers' Educational Associations, Extramural Departments of universities and Local Education Authorities to make it vocational and non-formal, became in practice non-vocational and nearly formal. The extramural departments of universities attracted students mostly from the middle class and the members of the middle class opted mainly for non vocational courses like liberal arts and social sciences. The Workers' Educational Associations originally intended to take only members of workers movements but soon found themselves overwhelmed by students from the middle class. Nearly 80-90% of the courses came to be non-vocational, in the areas of drama, music, foreign languages, etc. Very few students chose vocational courses such as Car Mechanics, etc. Local Education Authorities too present a similar picture.

One reason for the failure to attract those very members of the adult community who were really in need of education could be traced to the failure of adult educators to assess their needs correctly and then evolve curricula and courses in accordance with the needs identified. The British Open University strove to make some progress in this regard, but adult education as well as life long and continuing education had to face problems arising from the inertia and the powerful vested interests of the older educational systems.

It is possible that relevant educational structures could be thought of theoretically, but the development and the implementation of new curricula for distance education usually run into difficulties mainly because of conservative ethos and the limitations of socio-political structures. The initial zeal for innovations in education dried up quickly when the privileged groups of society benefits.

The UK Open University courses were produced with a view to overcoming the constraints of the prevalent curricula in the formal system of education. The three major considerations which seemed to have influenced the Open University curricula are:

- i) **Age:** The minimum age for a student at the Open University was fixed because students below that age might be more liable to be affected by loneliness or alienation that accompanies individualized study. Besides, by a certain age a learner could be considered mature enough to manage his/her studies.
- ii) **The assumed entry behaviour:** The assumed entry behaviour in the case of adult learners joining degree courses could not be the same as the entry behaviour of a student who had not completed his/her school education, hence preparatory courses became necessary for the Open University students.
- iii) **Standard of the educational performance:** The credibility of degrees/certificates obtained by Open University students could be established only if they compared qualitatively well with the education offered by formal educational institutions. Thus, the question of standards assumed importance while framing the curricula.

Besides these three major factors, what could be the other factors which affect the curricular trends in distance education in the U.K.?

The use of educational broadcasting, efficient student support services, the credit system and the modular approach play a significant role in shaping up the curriculum there.

Curricula for the Liberal Arts, Music, Social Sciences, Sciences, Humanities, Foreign Languages, etc., that already exist either modified or redesigned in the light of the above factors. For developing curricula for entirely new courses, a lot of research is being advanced to identify and assess:

- the needs,
- the feasibility of offering courses to meet the needs identified,
- the modalities to deliver the course materials,
- methods of teaching/learning, etc., and
- evaluation procedures.

However, the development of new curricula cannot be stated in absolute terms. Although there are needs for offering socially relevant and innovative educational programmes in a number of areas within developed countries like Britain, especially to those underprivileged sections who need new educational programmes, it is not always possible to go ahead with the implementation of innovative curricula, because of reasons which are not purely educational.

In a socio-political climate which is basically conservative, the institutional policies as well as curricular approaches tend to be compromising and evolutionary in character. This is true even in the case of distance education, notwithstanding its promises and the potential to offer innovative educational

programmes to a wide range of learners with different socio-academic backgrounds. Under such circumstances, “advances have usually been made only by pragmatists, who are prepared to modify and supplement existing systems to bring them more nearly into line with what is theoretically desirable but who do so in ways that are acceptable to the establishment” (Perry, 1976).

In other words, we cannot really think of any educational change that is revolutionary, if the social climate does not warrant or encourage it. Therefore, it has to be reformatory, evolutionary and compromising in nature. As we have mentioned, this is no less true in the case of developing new curricula for distance education programmes.

3.4.3 Curricula for Workers' Education

Worker's education in the advanced capitalist countries as well as the socialist countries, has been gradually coming under the fold of distance education. In the late 19th century and the early 20th century the main focus of workers' education was to create awareness among the working class populations in Britain, United States of America and other advanced capitalist countries of the West to help them claim and ask for their economic, political and social rights. Academics of the Extramural Departments in the UK, and the intellectuals who organised Workers Educational Programmes, were concerned not merely with basic literacy but included the programmes to agitate for better working conditions, economic compensation in the events of industrial accidents or loss of employment, etc.

Obviously, the concept of class, socialism, class conflicts etc, became necessary components of the curriculum for workers' education.

After the two World Wars, the picture changed considerably. Ideas such as the 'welfare state', and of egalitarianism through peaceful, reformist measures, etc., have replaced the tendency of class conflict by class collaboration. The increasing emphasis on worker participation in the production and in the decision making process without altering economic-political structure makes it obligatory for the workers to improve their production as well as managerial skills which have to be made to match the requirements of modern technology and science. In the age of super computers and robotics, the workers have to learn the necessary skills to operate and manage highly sophisticated machinery. Moreover, the relatively better economic returns and better living conditions in advanced countries make the workers pay little attention to the earlier issues and class conflicts. The relatively easy social mobility of individuals from the working class population has helped them realize that classes can be abolished without resorting to radical means.

This conciliatory approach, in turn, influenced the design and implementation of the educational programmes for the workers. Modern concepts about skills, management and organisation are included in the curricula now. Workers are given better facilities to learn and those who complete the relevant training/ educational programmes are given incentives. In the socialist countries too, the curricula or workers' education was designed with a view to improving the overall production of the society and at the same time meeting the educational needs of the working people. In essence, education of this kind has been linked with production. Distance education curriculum encourages innovative programmes and new ways of offering them. For example, distance teaching universities such as the CRTVU in China constantly experiment and change their curricula depending upon the actual requirements of the industries and factories from where these universities get their students. In India, workers' education is one of the potential areas where distance education can play a significant role. However, at present very little has been done in this regard.

3.4.4 Curricula for Unconventional Courses

The unconventional courses in most developing and underdeveloped countries relate to basic literacy, health, women's education, vocational education, functional literacy, etc. What distinguishes the curricula for these courses from the rest of the courses offered by distance teaching universities is that the new curricula have no models. For example, if one has to talk about women's education in Arab countries, Pakistan, India and other countries, where, by and large, women have been kept out of the educational sphere for centuries, you can't really look for any significant guidance or help from the advanced countries where women's education means something very different. Because of deep rooted prejudices and crude discrimination against women, even simple literacy programmes in these countries cannot be separated from some sort of social, reformative and liberation movement.

Similarly, educational programmes meant for the poor sections of the urban as well as the rural areas cannot be separated from their economic well-being and living conditions. General education, health education, environmental awareness, etc. have to come to the adult poor only through practical demonstrations which prove the usefulness of educational programmes. However much one talks about the formal innovations in curricula, their genuineness and relevance cannot be tested until they bring about perceptible change in the lives of those who opt for such programmes.

The educational programmes prepared and practised by Paulo Freire in many Latin American countries, notably in Columbia, Brazil and Chile could go a long way in helping the curriculum developers who endeavour to develop non-conventional educational programmes in the poorer countries. The socio-academic relevance of the innovative programmes in the Third World are primarily judged by their contribution to nation building. Unlike the innovative programmes in the advanced West which usually aim at the self-development of individuals or small groups of professionals, the distance education curriculum in the Third World has to take into account the socio-economic-academic needs of millions of people who are often illiterate. It is this question of sheer numbers and the logistics involved in the implementation of any educational programme - innovative or otherwise - that throws up the biggest challenge before curriculum developers.

The experience of Pakistan in evolving and implementing the new curricula could help us to some extent in assessing the problems of developing new curricula.

The Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) in Pakistan was established in 1975 with a view to spreading education at various levels to the different sections of the people of Pakistan. Although the AIOU sought much technical and organisational help from the British Open University, in matters of selection, planning and implementation of its curricula, the university had to depend on itself. This is so because it had to evolve new types of educational programmes for quite an unusual student clientele.

One of the primary aims of AIOU is to provide the masses of Pakistan with educational facilities from basic literacy to post-graduate levels. Accordingly, AIOU runs programmes on higher education in the existing disciplines, such as Humanities, Social Sciences, etc. Besides it has a wide range of unconventional programmes such as poultry, livestock, bank credit usage, nutrition, child care, Pakistani studies, functional literacy, vocational education, etc. The focus of the unconventional programmes is mostly on the day-to-day problems of the rural peasant population and the poor, semi-employed or unemployed people. The nature of the programmes and the methodology of teaching them suggest that in order to get educated one need not necessarily be literate.

AIOU’s unconventional courses can be broadly categorised under the following three headings:

- i) **General Education courses:** General education courses for the masses include two-tier functional literacy programmes—the stages being Post-literacy 1 and Post-literacy 2. Depending on the level of literacy needed to cope with a given programme, the student clientele will have to take up one of the two.
- ii) **Functional Education courses:** Functional education courses are related to home, vocational and community development. Plant protection, soil problems and their remedies, tractor repairs and maintenance, improved methods of print production, computer studies, auto servicing, auto-mechanics, maintenance and repairs of refrigerators and air-conditioners, secretarial skills, etc., are some of the many subjects on which courses are being offered by the AIOU.
- iii) **Other courses:** Besides, there are special educational programmes on population education, programmes for overseas Pakistanis and programmes for the handicapped.

Many of the programmes developed by the AIOU clearly indicate the potentiality of distance education in shaping new curricula in Third World countries. However, while developing new curricula we should also be cautious, lest we should overstate the merits of the programmes. We should, for example, anticipate questions raised on ideological grounds. For instance, the educational programmes developed for illiterate masses should have an objective with a time reference. They may be justified purely for reasons of exigency and must not become a justification for perpetuating illiteracy among the masses on the plea that one need not be literate in order to be educated. The contribution of these programmes to the economy and national development should be judged on the basis of the situation—economic and educational—of the masses. While recognising the potential of distance education for developing new curricula for the masses as in Pakistan and in the light of the experience of Paulo Freire in Latin America, we should also give serious thought to the elements of amelioration implicit in education.

Check Your Progress 5

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

What is the main problem in developing unconventional courses prevalent in most developing and underdeveloped countries?

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3.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have tried to give you an account of some of the essential aspects of curricular issues and trends in distance education. We have

discussed instructional issues, discipline-based issues, individual-based curriculum and relevance based issues, focusing on their significance to the development of distance education curricula. We have also attempted a critique of the ideological dimensions of education in general and their implications for distance education in particular. Finally, we have tried to show how the trends in distance education curricula in Western, as well as Socialist countries, differ from those of Third World countries in terms of their aims, form, content and strategies.

3.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

Unlike the behaviourist school of thinking, cognitive psychology emphasises that the human mind, i.e., the learner, plays a vital role in the teaching/learning process. Whereas, the eclectic approach uses principles from all the theories which synthesise towards explaining leadership, and avoid the conflicting positions of those theories.

Check Your Progress 2

A curriculum in Distance Education should be flexible enough to accommodate the changing demands as they emerge with the changing times. If it fails to do so, the curriculum ceases to be socially relevant and will eventually become redundant. The flexibility really lies in the case of course combinations and their span of life.

Check Your Progress 3

The dialectical-materialist approach lays stress on a curriculum which is independent of class influences, and aims at the overall social growth and well being of individual learners.

Check Your Progress 4

In the Third World countries, the broad aim of DE has been 'national' development which focuses importance on women's education, functional education, rural development, tribal education etc. The achievement of this aim lies in the political will of the government and the availability of resources.

Check Your Progress 5

The unconventional courses in most developing and underdeveloped countries have no model for guidance, because they have to take into account the varied socio-economic-academic needs of millions of people.

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