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# UNIT 9 DISTANCE LEARNERS AND SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

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## 9.0 INTRODUCTION

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Blocks 1 and 2 have given you clear understanding of the fact that individualised teaching and learning at a distance is the essence of distance education. You may accept the fact that distance teaching through SIMs / SLMs / SLPs is aimed at enabling the learners to learn without or with the help of teachers. The nature, characteristics, and learning styles, among others of distance learners play crucial role in their learning at a distance. In addition, their study skills and various factors influence the learning process of distance learners. In such a situation they may require support to make their learning more effective.

Therefore, in this unit, we will discuss important aspects related to the learners, self-learning or self-directed learning, the skills required for effective self-learning, and the ways of supporting self-directed learning.

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## 9.1 OBJECTIVES

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

- describe the characteristics of (adult) distance learners;
- analyse the problems and expectations of the distance learners;

- define the concept of self-directed learning;
- discuss the factors influencing self-directed learning;
- explain the study skills and communicational skills required for effective self-learning; and
- understand the role of communication technology, among other things, in facilitating self-learning.

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## 9.2 DISTANCE LEARNERS

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The well known common characteristic of distance learners pursuing higher education is that they are mature adults learning in isolation. There are many other common characteristics, which may vary from learner to learner. Let us look at these characteristics below.

### 9.2.1 Characteristics

Important common characteristics of Indian distance learners include the following.

#### i) Age

Though the distance learners are all adults, adulthood of these learners ranges from 18 years to 80 years or more. The distinct strength of distance education is thus to be seen in its flexibility to take care of the educational needs of learners of all ages. But, this flexibility needs to be understood and applied in concrete practical ways.

The different age groups of distance learners would pose serious pedagogic questions to instructional designers who need to consider the learning styles of different individuals as well as the different age groups. The age factor will also have implications for the choice of subject content, its level of difficulty, examination duration and schedule, etc. For example, learners in their thirties and forties would have better conceptual grasp and emotional stability in coping with the requirements of demanding subjects or the demanding areas in any subject than teenagers and other age-groups, though all are technically considered 'adults'. On the other hand, even very knowledgeable and mature learners in their forties and above may have problems in writing their examinations within a set time limit (say 3 hours), unless they regularly practice the mechanical and psychomotor skill of writing. Here the adults in their early twenties with their nimble fingers may write faster than their more mature elders writing the examination can. Age is thus an important consideration while deciding the work load, teaching-learning strategies, examination patterns and schedules, among other things. Further, age difference would matter in organising student support services too. We shall talk about the related issues of student support later.

#### ii) Gender

Gender is another important factor in understanding and providing necessary support to distance learners. By implication, we mean the difficulties faced by women as a disadvantaged gender group as a whole in general, and the socially, economically and educationally backward women in particular. Often, the gender inequalities are either kept aside or the issues concerning the 'creamy layer' of the female gender are projected as the gender issues. The fact that women and girls in rural areas, urban slums and tribal areas constitute the major chunk of the illiterate populace of a country like India shows that the gender issue has not been adequately addressed by the policy makers and institutional leaders so far. Though the prejudices against women affect negatively

the women belonging to all classes of society, the urban middle class and upper class women are incomparably more advanced than the women working in rural areas, urban slums and in the unorganized sectors. The latter suffer from multiple disadvantages and discriminations which should receive utmost attention from distance education institutions with mandate to reach them educationally. Gender discourse at the philosophical level must address far more serious issues than the gender bias of language use in the form of 'he' and 'she'. The social placement of women, the place given to them while deciding the curricular issues, the psychological and emotional barriers which restrict the participation of women during the teaching-learning process, the non-encouraging or intimidating domestic and work environments, the cultural or religious biases which restrict the participation of women, and women's own negative perceptions about themselves as well as their choices of courses and programmes are some of the issues which need to be carefully considered right from the very beginning of developing distance learning programmes through their implementation.

### iii) Social Status

The heterogeneity of distance learners in a country like India includes social disparities in terms of both caste and class. Caste hierarchy is unique to India. Though it has a lot of historical and sociological significance, caste system in India has been playing a negative role in democratising education and developing a democratic, scientific, secular and egalitarian world view among the people. Distance learning, in order to attain its goal of breaking the educational barriers of people, has to first break the social barriers to education. Traditional thinking about certain professions and their related skills should not stand in the way of people choosing other professions and educational programmes. For example, tannery workers and construction workers may do distance learning programmes to improve their skills, but they should never get the feeling that they cannot change their professions or choose other learning programmes of their choice. Social prejudices often act against the educational interests and learning competencies of disadvantaged sections of society such as women, members of backward castes, scheduled castes and tribes, religious minorities and people with disabilities. These and other social factors must be dealt with when we talk about the social status of distance learners.

### iv) Economic Status

Usually, social status, economic status and educational status go together, because they are mostly interlinked. Though this is generally true, in India, there are certain peculiarities. There are instances of people with better social status and high educational potential but cannot realise their educational potential because of poor economic status. Differential fee structures and policies of subsidy of institutions should take into account the economic status of the learners as well. In general, the rural poor and the socially backward people do not have enough money to pay for their education. This aspect is crucial to their access to courses which have high professional and employment potential. For example, courses of management, computer sciences and other professional courses have a good market, but they also demand high fees. Poor students and unemployed persons can hardly afford these courses. Naturally such courses offered by distance teaching institutions cater to the educational needs of those who are already economically well off. This kind of subtle elitism needs to be balanced with appropriate policy changes, in terms of scholarships, subsidies, fee exemptions, etc., to enable those who are economically poor but want to pursue courses with job opportunities.

#### v) Educational Status

By educational status we mean the educational environment that prevails in a family or community. In India, it is not uncommon even today to see families and communities/ castes which are economically poor but educationally well endowed. Members of these families and communities can easily do well in their studies if the necessary economic support is given to them. On the other hand, the neo-rich in certain regions and the communities which had traditionally been kept out of the mainstream of education cannot be expected to perform well in their study by merely giving them some monetary aid in the form of scholarships or fee concessions or total fee exemptions. Most of the first generation learners lack the necessary self-confidence and sophistication to do well in their studies, particularly when they learn through distance mode. In this case, even economically high status will not help the learners much. Therefore, the educational profile of families, communities and regions become an important curricular issue for distance educators.

#### vi) Geographical Location

The urban-rural divide is a major issue that determines the educational opportunities and through this the learning outcomes of the learners. Urban learners always enjoy the advantage of having easy access to the necessary information. They also get a relatively better exposure to educational institutions and their chances of forming peer groups for better academic interaction are also more. In the rural areas, it is difficult for the learners to get even information on the distance education institutions and the programmes/ courses. They also face other difficulties like travel, time, etc., whenever they want to make use of the study centre-based support services. Additionally, they have to temporarily shift themselves to urban environments, which by itself becomes a major distraction. Most Indian villages are poorly connected by roads and postal services, though radio, television and even telephones have made some inroads in the rural areas.

In geographically remote and hilly areas, learners are dispersed and they need special communication channels. Many hill tribes and those who have been posted in the geographically hostile areas with extreme weather conditions (e.g., armed forces, and professionals with special assignments) need special assistance and arrangements to pursue their studies as a part of their continuing education or their professional capacity building programmes. Geographical locations of distance learners should have a bearing on the policies and practices of distance teaching institutions.

#### vii) Other Characteristic Issues

Besides the above discussed factors, there are certain other important issues which would inform us about the characteristics of distance learners and their needs. The following need special mention.

- a) **Language Skills:** In bi-lingual and multi-lingual situations, acquisition of linguistic skills is extremely important for the learners to successfully learn through their courses. In India, most of the courses at the higher education level are offered through the medium of English which is not the mother tongue of most Indians. Distance learners, therefore, must have the minimum necessary competence in using English, if they have to successfully complete their courses. On the other hand, the course writers must also have the necessary competence and writing skills when they develop courses in English as a medium of instruction. If the institutions concerned decide to offer courses through the mother tongues of learners (i.e., in Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, Bengali, Marathi and other Indian languages),

they must ensure that there is enough knowledge base in the languages concerned so as to equip the learners with adequate knowledge and information so that they compare and compete well with those who learn through the medium of English. The main issue here is to create courses at the appropriate level with acceptable standard and provide additional reading materials in the languages concerned. This is a major challenge which is yet faced by distance education and educationists in general in India.

- b) **Academic Traditions:** In societies with strong oral traditions and high respect for teachers, students expect ‘teaching’ by teachers rather than ‘learning’ by themselves from the study material. India is known for its ‘Guru-Shishya Parampara’ (Teacher-Disciple Tradition) and the tradition still continues in some forms in the campus-based educational institutions and holds away in fine arts like classical music, dance, painting and sculpture. Distance learners suddenly face a different teaching-learning situation which puts the onus on the learners. When this transition from ‘teaching’ to ‘learning’ occurs suddenly, the distance learners are in for a cultural shock. This shock becomes more intense when the technology-based or digital-based distance education is given to them with little or no preparedness or poor support services. Some of these issues have already caught the attention of distance educators. In 1998, the Association of Asian Open Universities chose ‘The Asian Distance Learner’ as the theme for its Annual conference in Hong Kong. Otto Peters (1998) has reflected upon the Asian Distance Learner by raising a number of theoretical and pedagogic issues related to distance learning in Asia. The theme, was taken up seriously with specific focus on issues of access, materials and technological support and institutional collaboration in meeting the needs of the Asian open and distance learner and to provide solutions to many learning related problems faced by the distance learners.
- c) **Learners with Disabilities:** Learners with different types of disabilities receive special attention from the well-known distance teaching institutions such as the Open University, UK, the Fern Universitat, Germany, Hong Kong Open University, China, the Hadley School for the Blind, USA and others. The Open University, UK, Fern Universitat, Germany, the distance teaching institutions of Hong Kong, China, Japan, USA, Canada and other developed countries have large number of students with disabilities of different kinds and have made special arrangements to help the students with disabilities to successfully study through their courses. In India, particularly at the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) efforts are made to meet the special requirements of disabled learners through various means such as fee concessions, special study centres, enabling technologies, course material in the appropriate media and special need-based courses and programmes. However, the needs of the disabled students are yet to be addressed by the DE institutions in India in a significant way. Physical disabilities such as lack of mobility, visual impairment, hearing impairment, mental retardation, and different types of learning disabilities like autism, dyslexia, etc., must be given serious attention, when we develop distance education programmes and implement them.
- d) **Learning Styles:** A comprehensive definition for learning styles that has been adopted by leading theorists in the field is given by Keefe (1989; quoted by Griggs, 1991): “Composite of characteristic cognitive, affective and psychological factors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how a learner perceives, interacts with and responds to the learning environment.” Depending upon their socio-economic, cultural, linguistic and other background different learners get used to

different learning styles. Their learning styles are determined by their composite cognitive, affective and psychological factors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how they learn, perceive, interact with and respond to the learning environment. Accordingly, their learning styles are bound to be different. Kit Logan and Pete Thomas (<http://www.ppig.org/papers/14th-logan.pdf>) studied the preferred learning styles of distance education students such as having an experience (*Activist style*), reviewing an experience (*Reflector style*), concluding from an experience (*Theorist style*), planning the next steps (*Pragmatist style*). Grasha & Reichmann’s Student Learning Styles Scales (Grasha, 1996) present six styles: Independent, Avoidant, Collaborative, Dependent, Competitive and Participant. Thus, learning style of some learners may be competitive, that of others may be collaborative, avoidant, participant, dependent, independent and so on. Therefore, the learning experiences need to be diversified by the distance teacher so as to cater to the different learning styles of different categories of learners.

**Check Your Progress**

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

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit under “Answers to ‘Check Your Progress’ Questions”.

1) Describe in brief the salient features of Indian distance learners (you can draw on your experience too, in addition to what you read in the Unit).

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**9.2.2 Problems**

From the foregoing discussion, you can easily understand how challenging it is to meet educational needs of the varied and complex clientele of distance learners. Because of their very composition, distance learners groups will have study-related problems which would defy easy or uniform solutions. Distance educators must think of flexible, practical and appropriate strategies to meet the academic needs of the learners while attempting to solve their problems. Let us first see what kinds of problems are typically faced by distance learners.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) manual on Distance Open Learning (1997) mentions the following as the problems faced by distance learners:

- isolation
- organising studies and study space
- finding sufficient time to study
- balancing work, study and family

- lack of motivation
- lack of resources and equipment
- lack of study techniques (or study skills)

It also mentions the ‘information’, ‘contact’ (i.e. contact with the institution/teacher/tutors/ counsellors), ‘institutional identity’ and ‘advice on how to study’ as the special needs of distance learners. To solve the problems faced by the learners and to take care of their special needs (not in terms of special education), counselling, tutoring and administrative support are recommended at different stages of students learning: pre-enrolment stage, the starting stage of study, during the study and after the completion stage. How exactly the strategies to do these should be formulated will depend on the specific situations or contexts in which they need to be adopted.

While answering the question “Why Students Don’t Learn?”, Gibbs, et. al. (1982), they question the following commonly given explanations:

- Students lack the necessary study skills;
- Students are of different types and some students have limited approaches to studying;
- Students choose their approaches to studying and some students choose inflective or inappropriate approaches;
- Students develop in their sophistication as learners and some are less developed than others; and
- Some aspects of course design constrain students in their learning.

Analysing and examining the veracity of the above explanations, Gibbs, et. al. (*op cit*) conclude: “It may not be helpful to view poor students as lacking certain skills ... .. It may not be helpful to view students as having fixed style of learning ... .. To some extent students actively and consciously choose their approaches to study... .. To some extent (they) seem to develop as learners in that they develop increasingly sophisticated conceptions of the learning process and of the nature of knowledge. Even a skilled sophisticated student can go about learning in limited, surface-processing ways (because of external constraints such as the over-sized curricula, demanding assessment system, lack of background knowledge of interest)”.

The above research findings already indicate the limitations of simple generalizations about the characteristics, problems and difficulties faced by distance learners who have very different orientations, in terms of age, educational background, interest, study skills, learning skills, etc. However, positive interventions by distance teachers, tutor counsellors and the teaching institutions would certainly help the distance learners overcome many of their study related problems. There are other problems faced by distance learners for which solutions may come from their own living and working environments. For example, finding time to study regularly and organising the daily routine of distance learners cannot be directly regulated or supervised by distance teaching institutions, though some guidelines and suggestions to organise the study habits of students can be made by the Academic Counsellors. But, by and large, the onus rests with the students to arrange and organise their own studies at the timings and the places most suitable for them.

For working/employed adult learners, morning time and home-based study may not be easy always. Evenings and holidays would be ideal for them to study in the homes.

On working days, they can read their lessons in print while travelling or during the leisure time at the places of work. However, these arrangements will have to be adjusted according to their professional and domestic commitments. So, for you too, finding time to study is directly related to your motivation and adjustment of your schedule. You must have read many biographies of great personalities who had very busy schedules, and yet had time to read a lot. You can get inspiration from your peers, friends and acquaintances with those who do well in their studies, in spite of their busy schedules and many commitments.

Having said this, we must admit that serious study requires proper arrangements. You must find a place to keep your books and notes in an orderly fashion so that you will have a positive and pleasant feeling whenever you look at your study table. Your study place must have sufficient light and ventilation. Do not heap your books, notes and papers clumsily on your study table. Keep only those books and papers on it that you require at the time of your study. If your study table is cluttered, you will have difficulty in concentrating on your studies.

Striking a balance between your study and work is the challenge. We know how difficult it is to complete one's study successfully through distance mode. But proper planning and perseverance will ensure your success. You should get your priorities right. Suppose you have to submit your assignment responses on a particular date, but you find some other work very fascinating, say reading a lesson which is not connected with your present assignment. At such moments you must resist the temptation of postponing the submission of your assignment response. Sometimes, delay may lead to a year's delay in completing your studies.

A feeling of isolation and boredom is common in the distance learning process. At times difficulties in understanding the content or answering the assignments may discourage you. Or, some of the members of your family comment adversely on your studies. Your children would demand your time when you are under tremendous pressure to complete an assignment and also your office work. Friends and relatives may drop in unannounced, and they may not take your hint that you are awfully busy. The cultural setting you are in may not be very conducive to pursue your studies. For example, your kith and kin may tell you that you need not 'waste' your time studying further but you would 'do well' if you look after your 'business'. They may ask you to measure something you may find it embarrassing and impossible to do. In all such situations it is better to ignore the discouraging comments and absurd questions. But in real life situations we do react, often sharply, to any suggestion that discourages us from studying. With experience we learn to cope with such situations without neglecting our studies.

Distance teaching institutions, particularly distance educators and Academic Counsellors can help their learners in solving many of their study related problems. A lot depends on the ability of the institutions concerned to appreciate the unique features of distance learning, anticipate the problems faced by the distance learners and plan the academic programmes as well as support services suitably. Success and failure of distance learners depend, to a considerable extent, on the degree of understanding, responsiveness and readiness of the institutions to help and facilitate the learners in their studies. Quality concerns of the institutions should persuade them to take care of the interests and the concerns of the learners, in all the activities related to curriculum, syllabus, course development, course delivery, evaluation and the different kinds of student support services.



In the next section, we shall discuss some of the ways of motivating distance learners as well as sustaining their interest in learning at a distance.

### 9.2.3 Expectations

You must have seen in the previous sections what efforts distance learners have to make and what difficulties they have to face in order to complete their studies successfully. To enable the learners to cope with their studies, institutional support of different kinds is absolutely necessary. In fact, the crucial difference between ‘private study’ and ‘distance open learning’ is to be seen in the latter’s deliberate efforts to provide support and a learning environment to the isolated distance learners. We shall touch upon a few important types of support that distance learners in developing countries usually expect from their distance teachers and institutions.

- i) **Motivation:** We can fairly be certain about the motivation of learners to register for programmes / courses. Unless they have motivation, they wouldn’t decide to study them, especially when they have to pay hard earned money towards course fee. But this kind of motivation alone is not enough for them to be successful in their studies. They need a different kind of motivation, i.e. the motivation to engage themselves in answering the assignments and meeting the necessary requirements of the courses. It is this motivation that will give the learners the necessary confidence to overcome their difficulties, sustain their interests and resist the temptation of dropping out. The distance learner “is at (the) greatest risk of becoming a drop-out during the first term, semester or year of study” (Roberts 1984). Motivation from distance teachers, tutors and counsellors at various stages would help the learners to drop the idea of dropping out whenever they feel difficulties of whatever kind — study related or personal. Initial motivation can be effectively provided, if the institutions know how to establish a support for the learners and create in them a sense of belonging. The learner should feel: “Here is an institution which cares for me. I can seek its support whenever I am in a genuine difficulty”. Such a sense of belonging should be created right from the beginning of the institutional contact with the learners — from the time of advertising the courses, at the time of sending admission letters, sending the first batch of study materials and up to the time of awarding degrees or even later. Constant interaction between the institution and the learners would develop a sense of belonging, mutual trust and a positive environment for learning.
- ii) **Operational support:** The most important aspect of developing and sustaining the interest and motivation of distance learners is the efficiency with which an institution handles its operations and logistics. The image about the institutions plays a crucial role in motivating the learners to study. Accurate and timely information about courses and programmes at the pre-enrolment stage in the form of advertisements and pre-enrolment counselling would help learners in deciding about their strategies of learning. Timely admissions, clear schedules of dispatch of materials, assignments submission, counselling and tutoring, and effective implementation of the schedules instill confidence in the learners and inspire them to study through the courses, even if the courses are tough. A weak administration would create a chaos which in turn would de-motivate the learners, though the courses may be very good and academically useful. For example, if the materials do not reach the students in time, the students will have serious problems in meeting the schedules of assignments submission; they won’t be able to prepare themselves for the counselling session; and because of these and other related difficulties their performance in the final examinations will be affected.

Similarly, the assignment responses submitted by the learners must be assessed, commented upon and returned in time. The purpose of assignments is to teach the learners by giving them timely feedback. But very often, assignment responses are either submitted late by the students, or they are not assessed by the tutor-counsellors and returned to the students in time. This kind of non-serious approach would be detrimental to students' learning and the purpose of giving assignments to students will also be defeated.

Another important operation that plays vital role in distance learning is the organization of tutorial and counselling sessions. Whatever be the strength of learning materials, the isolated distance learners will always have the need to have face-to-face meetings with the teachers and their peers. Tutorials and counselling sessions enable such meetings to take place. These meetings are the only channels which help learners to interact freely with the tutor-counsellors and peers, not only on issues related to course materials, but also on issues related to their study arrangements which often clash with their domestic and professional commitments. Therefore counselling and tutorial sessions must be planned systematically with a view to helping the learners academically and emotionally. The quality of counsellors and their approach to learners very often determine the persistence and the drop-out rates in distance education. A positive experience would encourage the learner to continue his/her studies and a negative experience would result in his/her dropping out.

Finally, the preparation for the term-end examination is the last major challenge that distance learners have to face, the outcome of which will decide the success or failure of studying at a distance. Timely conduct of examination, assessment and evaluation of the answer-scripts, announcement of results and correct certification would give the utmost satisfaction to the serious and active learners. Operational and administrative efficiency will help the learners take timely decisions regarding their further studies and career.

- iii) **Timely addressing of problems/difficulties:** Certainly the young learners coming fresh from High Schools and Higher Secondary Schools miss a lot of their socialization and youthful joy of studying together on campus when they choose to be distance learners for whatever reasons. In general, these young distance learners do not feel very confident and comfortable with studying at a distance. Women, young housewives, unemployed youth, first generation learners from under privileged families, students with disabilities and retired persons are vulnerable to many difficulties and emotional trauma, and at the slightest inconvenience they are likely to drop-out. If we analyze the reasons for non-performance or lack of interest of students in a distance learning situation, we would discover that most of the factors that discourage students are institution-related. And they can easily be tackled, given the institutional will.

One of the commonest problems faced by distance learners in India is non-responsiveness to their queries. Suppose there is a delay on the part of the institution in dispatching the study materials to the students. Or wrong packs of materials have been sent to some students. When students contact the institution(s) concerned to help them in this regard, quite often they may not receive satisfactory or clear response. Such a lack of response from institutions may be the result of badly organized despatch procedures but this would cost the students dearly, and any initial negative experience will create negative impression in the students about the institution as well as the students' own study plans. These negative impressions

can easily be prevented, if the institutions take enough care while dispatching study materials to students.

Even if there are no problems with the dispatch of materials, students may face problems in answering their assignments, especially the first assignment. Students need some guidance at this point. They can get the necessary guidance and help from their tutors, counsellors or mentors, provided they are in a position to contact each other. It is possible to enable the students to meet their tutor-counsellors and their peers during the contact-cum-counselling sessions held at the study centers. But the location of study centers, the distance to be covered by travel, time, money and other constraints may not allow some of the students to attend the contact sessions. Even if they attend the sessions lack of arrangements at the study centers and the limited time available to both the tutor-counsellor and the study centre functionaries may not help the students in sorting out their study problems. In these situations, the possible solutions could be to attach a specific number of students with a particular tutor or counsellor and enable them to interact through correspondence, telephones or personal visits.

The other possible problems faced by distance learners may be at the time of writing their projects or preparing for their term-end/final examinations. They may also face problems, if they do not get in time their assignment responses back with helpful comments and appropriate grades and marks. In these matters, the institutions of distance teaching have to adopt professional approaches and give individual attention to the learners with problems. Formal, bureaucratic and rigid policies and practices would de-motivate the learners. Worst of all, non-responsiveness and 'holier than thou' attitudes of institutions would bring discredit to the institutions concerned and seriously undermine the credibility of distance learning as a system. The extreme possibilities are that the learners may publicly criticise the erring institutions or approach courts of law for legal remedy. Such situations will not be pleasant ones.

Quality assurance is the key to answering all the above mentioned problems possibly faced by our learners. But quality assurance is not simply possible, unless we set up institutional mechanisms to take care of quality of all the activities related to distance teaching practices. There are no such things in distance education which can be termed as more important and less important. Every activity or operation will have its impact on the rest of the activities within an institution.

For example, quality assurance in the programme development would mean: appropriate curriculum, high quality and learner-friendly study materials and timely delivery of the materials. Assuming the curriculum is appropriate, because of involvement of academics of reputation, the question of developing high quality, learner-friendly study materials can be answered satisfactorily, only if you have high quality academic staff to do the job. Formal positions of academics such as 'Lecturer', 'Reader' and 'Professor' will not guarantee the development of quality materials. Whether you involve internal faculty or the external course writers is not that important as identifying and involving the right kind of academics to develop distance learning materials which require higher level abilities and good writing skills. 'Democracy' and 'equality' among colleagues will not work here. Quality assurance in academic matters such as course development is possible only when you have at least a few people who can distinguish between the good and the bad materials and do what is necessary to correct the weaknesses of a given course or programme. For example, if you get a badly written unit in terms of content,

presentation and language from any course writers you must be able to remove all the weaknesses and make it acceptable. This is one aspect of quality control and quality assistance. Similar exercises must be done in every activity of distance teaching, if we have to minimise the difficulties of distance learners.

**Check Your Progress**

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

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit under “Answers to ‘Check Your Progress’ Questions”.

2) Identify at least five operational problems which, in your view, may seriously obstruct the learning process in the distance education situation. How would you solve them, if you are asked to?

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### 9.3 SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

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You know that learning encompasses learner’s capacity to acquire, represent, recall, respond to and use information. It refers to how we perceive, act, think and remember objects / things / information. Therefore, self-learning too refers to all these, and require greater ability to reflect upon, understand and control one’s learning (Dart, 1997). Self-learning or self-directed learning is an essential condition of distance learning. Let us understand the concept of self-directed learning.

#### 9.3.1 Concept

In self-learning, also called self-directed learning, the emphasis is laid on the learner capability to learn according to his/her needs, interest, ability and pace. According to Knowles (1975, p.18), ‘self-directed learning’ is a process by which individuals take the initiative, with or without the assistance of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. Knowles (1975 and 1984) differentiated adult learning (andragogy) from child learning (pedagogy). His thinking is based on the premise that in the case of adult learners there is a steady increase in their need and capacity to:

- be self-directing in their study;
- make use of their life experience in learning;
- identify their own readiness to learn; and
- organise their own learning around real experiences.

In this andragogical model of learning, the teacher is a facilitator who helps diagnose learning needs of learners, creates a climate conducive to learning and designs a series of learning experiences with appropriate techniques and resources (Knowles, 1984). The learners are expected to be goal-oriented, activity-oriented and learning-oriented. Knowles delineates self-learning with the following justification:

- Self-directed learners are better learners. They learn more things easily.
- They are fully capable of taking charge of their own learning. (Therefore, self-directed learning is more in tune with natural process of their psychological development).
- They look for opportunities for development of appropriate skills.
- They are in favour of change in education and learning in the era of rapidly changing world of knowledge.

We may call self-learning as *self-managed* learning or *self-directed* learning also. It is, therefore, usually argued that self-learning requires learners to have high level of commitment, self-initiative and self-discipline. They are not only highly motivated but also able to sustain their motivation throughout their study.

Self-learning is characterised by certain learner-centred features of learning. It facilitates the learners to learn: *when they want* (according to their own time, frequency and duration convenient to them); *how they want* (according to modes of learning suitable to them); and *what they want* (learning objectives and content).

The learner who is accustomed to learn together with other learners under the direct supervision of the teacher might initially feel it difficult to acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes through self-learning. In order to achieve it (self-learning skill) he has to train himself in the process of leaning without or with little external support. He has to become autonomous in planning and controlling his learning activities and fix the time, duration and places of his learning. For the most part of his learning the learning becomes individualised and autonomous. Thus, self-learning is principally initiated and managed by the learner himself/herself.

Individualised, learner-centred learning lies at the heart of successful educational systems. It is more so with distance education system. Various media such as radio, telephone, fax, computer and satellite technologies have proved their worth in helping learners to stay in touch with the teacher and the institution. Distance learning promotes self-learning which takes place in the individual context demanding independent learning, to a greater extent.

Though distance education is often thought of as independent learning due to the physical separation of the learner from the institution, pedagogically it need not be so (Seaton, 1993). Self-learning encompasses both the aspects of physical separation and greater pedagogical control by the learner. The essence of this type of learning is to be seen in the degree of learner control over what, when and how learning takes place. The greater the degree of learner control, the greater is the learner's autonomy and hence self-learning.

You might have observed that the learning during childhood is more teacher-directed, but, as the learner matures, he/she develops independent thinking and uses it to acquire knowledge. Self-learning then becomes more real and meaningful. Because of their separation from the teacher and institution distance learners are more close to the idea

of self-learning, which is an important feature of distance education. Learning materials, tools and technologies are chosen to meet the needs of the learning by way of facilitating their self-learning. Self-learning depends more on the learners themselves — their motivation to learn, their commitment to learn on their own with the necessary self-discipline. Learning at a distance is a good test of self-reliance and self-determination of the learners. DE makes the learners understand that most knowledge, perceptions and insights come from their own actions and from their own initiatives. Thus, the learners come to realise that the best teacher is really oneself, and that personal efforts made in this process of self-learning are the most productive.

We know that there are no short-cuts to learn. Successful independent study involves a great deal of concentration. Self-learning is a hard and demanding task. It depends on the following main pre-requisites:

- a desire or motivation to learn;
- clear and realistic goals;
- systematic approach to studies; and
- adequate academic support.

In our discussion, in this section, we have tried to highlight the fact that in self-learning the responsibility for learning is shifted from the teacher to the learner. It gives the learner the autonomy to make decisions and accept the responsibility for selection of suitable leaning strategies to achieve the learning goals.

We can thus conclude that the concept of self-learning or self-directed learning, particularly in distance education system, is essentially characterised by:

- A learner-centred approach to teaching and learning;
- Learner’s responsibility for his/her own learning;
- Flexible provision of education to meet individual needs, interests and requirements; and
- Use of specially designed and prepared learning materials (see Unit 7).

**Check Your Progress**

**Note:** a) Write you answer in the space given below.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit under “Answers to ‘Check Your Progress’ Questions”.

3) What are the essential characteristics of self-directed learning in distance education?

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### 9.3.2 Stages

Based on our discussion under Sub-section 9.2.1 above, you might have noticed that the distance learners are not homogenous entity and vary in their learning abilities and styles, among other things. Self-directed learning by such group of learners demands certain responsibilities on the part of distance learners and teachers. Self-directed learning (SDL) is dependent upon the characteristic stage style of self-directed learning and the teaching style suitable for effective learning.

Gerald Grow (1991) identifies four styles of self-directed learning and the four styles of teaching along with possible teacher pitfalls, and presents it as Staged Self-Directed Learning (SSDL) Model.

**Table 9.1: The Staged Self-Directed Learning (SSDL) Model**

Stage	Learning Style of Student	Teaching Style of Teacher	Examples	Possible Teacher Pitfalls
Stage 1	Dependent	Authority, Coach	Coaching with immediate feedback, drill and informational lecture. Overcoming deficiencies and resistance.	Can be too controlling that stifles learner initiative and enhances dependency.
Stage 2	Interested	Motivator, Guide	Inspiring lecture plus guided discussion. Goal setting and learning strategies.	May end up entertaining well but leaving learners with little learning skills and/or motivation.
Stage 3	Involved	Facilitator	Discussion facilitated by teacher who participates as equal. Seminar, Group projects.	May end up accepting and valuing anything from anybody; students then show little respect.
Stage 4	Self-Directed	Consultant, Delegator	Internship, dissertation, individual work or self-directed study group.	May withdraw too much and thus lose touch and fail to monitor progress.

**Source:** Grow (1991) at [www.essentialgptrainingbook.com/resources/.../Grow%20-%20SSDL%20model.doc](http://www.essentialgptrainingbook.com/resources/.../Grow%20-%20SSDL%20model.doc) — Retrieved on 05-01-2017.

Gerald Grow (*op cit*) emphasised that:

- the ability to be self-directed is situational; one may be self-directed in one subject, a dependent learner in another.
- there is nothing wrong with being a dependent learner -- one who needs to be taught.

Therefore, the purpose of this model is to help you:

- identify* where your current learners are in terms of *self-directedness*,
- match* your educational activities/session to that level, and then
- facilitate their progression* to the next higher level.

These four stages gradually release or reduce responsibility of the teacher as the learner becomes increasingly self-directed. Grow (1991) emphasizes that moving the learner onto the next stages requires time; it doesn't happen overnight. The basic principle of SDL is that *teaching is situational*: the style of teaching needs to be matched to the learner's ability and motivation at the time (termed 'readiness').

Good teaching, Grow believes, does two things: a) it matches the student's stage of self-direction, and b) it empowers the student to progress toward greater self-direction.

**How to Determine a Learner's Level of Self Direction?**

You can try and get a global picture of the learner when you feel you have got to know them better. The following questions may help you determine your inner feeling on the matter (<http://www.longleaf.net/ggrowsSDL/Disc.html#DefinitionDiscussion>, cited in Grow, 1991 at [www.essentialgptrainingbook.com/resources/.../Grow%20-%20SSDL%20model.doc](http://www.essentialgptrainingbook.com/resources/.../Grow%20-%20SSDL%20model.doc)).

- 1) What is the learner's level of motivation?
- 2) How well does the learner perform when asked to take initiative in an assignment?
- 3) Does the learner participate in class discussions?
- 4) How much detailed direction does the learner require?
- 5) How well does the learner work with others on group projects?
- 6) How much pressure does the learner put on you (the teacher) to be an authority figure who dictates the learning cycle? Or to what extent does this student want to take charge of her own learning?
- 7) Can the learner practise on his own to assimilate the skills necessary to learn the subject?
- 8) In the case of a dependent learner, to what extent does the dependency result from a lack of skills (which he is learning), and to what extent does it result from a lack of interest, low confidence, low motivation, and discouragement?

After describing the stages of the learner and type/style of teaching required, Grow (1991) puts them into the following matrix to match and compare them in teaching-learning context.

**Table 9.2: The Matching Table**

<b>S4: Self-Directed Learner</b>	<i>Severe Mismatch</i> *1	<i>Mismatch</i>	Near Match	<b>Match</b>
<b>S3: Involved Learner</b>	<i>Mismatch</i>	Near Match	<b>Match</b>	Near Match
<b>S2: Interested Learner</b>	Near Match	<b>Match</b>	Near Match	<i>Mismatch</i>
<b>S1: Dependent Learner</b>	<b>Match</b>	Near Match	<i>Mismatch</i>	<i>Severe Mismatch</i> *2
	<b>T1: 'The Expert'</b>	<b>T2: Motivator</b>	<b>T3: Facilitator</b>	<b>T4: Delegator</b>

**Note:** \*1 = Students resent authoritarian teacher.

\*2 = Students resent freedom they are not ready for.

**Source:** [www.essentialgptrainingbook.com/resources/.../Grow%20-%20SSDL%20model.doc](http://www.essentialgptrainingbook.com/resources/.../Grow%20-%20SSDL%20model.doc).

This table is to help you match your style according to the learner's level of self direction to ultimately allow you to move them on to the next stage. For example, an S2 student



should be paired with a T2 teacher for an exact match. But from the table you'll notice that pairing with a teacher from either side, one step up (T3) or one step below (T1), will be near matches too. The problem is if you extend beyond this where you get start getting significant mismatches and therefore ineffective learning.

From the above table you will notice that:

- Problems occur when dependent learners are mismatched with non-directive teachers and when self-directed learners are mismatched with highly directive teachers.
- **T1/S4 is a severe mismatch:** Some S4 learners develop the ability to function well and retain overall control of their learning, even under directive teachers. Other S4 learners, however, *will resent the authoritarian teacher and rebel* against the barrage of low-level demands. This mismatch may cause the learner to rebel or retreat into boredom. S4 learners don't jump through hoops just because somebody says to (even though younger students are ordinarily expected to do so without question as in Grammar Schools and some Universities).
- **T4/S1 is also a severe mismatch:** Here, the teacher delegates responsibility that the learner is not equipped to handle which can reinforce any lack of confidence. Students *may resent or even hate the teacher for forcing upon them a freedom they are not ready for*.
- Remaining situations are "near match" and "match".

You need to appreciate the fact that the distance learners with diverse characteristics might represent all the self-directed learning styles mentioned above and the self-learning (instructional) materials and distance teaching methods and techniques must match to the learning abilities and styles of these learners to realize the educational objectives with possible dynamism required.

**Check Your Progress**

- Note:** a) Write you answer in the space given below.  
 b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit under "Answers to 'Check Your Progress' Questions".

4) Mention different characteristic stage styles of self-directed learning.

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**9.3.3 Advantages and Disadvantages**

Following are the **advantages** of self-directed learning.

- It offers an opportunity to overcome the natural curiosity of the learner to be led by teacher.
- It provides opportunities to pursue wider range of interests than is possible in a typical teacher-directed learning.

- It is relatively stress-free approach to learning which reinforces collaboration within and beyond the family.
- It promotes the natural development of self-confidence, initiative, perseverance and life satisfaction.
- The learners become motivated, persistent, independent, self-disciplined, and goal-oriented.
- It offers an experience of empowerment through the power of choice and decision-making on what, when, and how to learn.
- It enhances the level of learner's focus, since the learning process is controlled by the learner himself/herself.
- It improves attitudes toward learning and provides an opportunity to learn through the lens of the learner's own culture, worldview, and perspective.
- It offers an opportunity for development of higher order thinking, problem-solving, collaborating skills.
- It focuses on self-evaluation and monitoring of the progress of actual learning as opposed to evaluation or assessment of his learning by others.

**Disadvantages:** These include the following.

- The learner may fail to identify the learning needs according to his/her academic level and ability.
- The learner may not be able to find or access appropriate resources for learning.
- There is little opportunity for the learner to get peer feedback.
- Learner may find it difficult to evaluate his/her own progress.
- There is a possibility for frequent errors or repetition of the same errors.
- It encourages students to develop their own rules and leadership patterns.
- It thrusts greater responsibility on the learners for his/her own learning and monitoring.

### 9.3.4 Factors Influencing Self-directed Learning

In this section we focus on factors that influence self-directed learning.

#### i) Learning Materials

Self-directed learning or self-learning depends on the provision of effective learning materials which are specially designed to enable learners to learn independently. The quality of learning materials has a strong bearing on independent learning. The learning materials should be well-designed, developed and presented to make learning easy and manageable for the learner and also appropriate to meet the needs of the individual learners. Many distance educators emphasise the importance of clear objectives, instructions, realistic expectations and self-contained nature of materials for independent learning. Lack of clarity in the learning materials could lead to frustration, de-motivation and subsequent disengagement of learners from the programme, especially if external learning support is not adequately available.

Innovative teaching approaches and specially designed learning materials help/facilitate self or independent learning. The following factors related to course design found to be important by Dart (1997), are useful for a better understanding of self-learning:

- Course design helps learners to develop knowledge about their own learning by emphasising the importance of seeking meaning, understanding, and seeing things in a different way. This can be effected through the provision of activities that require accessing different sources of information.
- The course design should make the learners aware of their own learning process through activities that demand analysis, application, evaluation and reflection.
- The design should provide opportunities to the learners to experience autonomy and self-direction in their learning through their active involvement in the learning process.
- The learners should be convinced that the materials they are learning through are useful, interesting and challenging.
- The learners should be made aware of the models of desirable learning behaviours (processes) and outcomes (products).

It means that the approaches to teaching and the nature, type and quality of materials will have their bearing on self-learning.

## ii) Educational Background

Educational background and job experience, grades / marks obtained in the previous study and academic ability are significant variables which influence the quality of self-learning. The past learning experiences of the learner also influence the quality of independent learning. Learners' perceptions of their academic ability and the ability to be an independent learner have appeared to be highly predictive of success or otherwise of their study attempts. From Units - 4 and 5 of Block-1 you might have noticed that some open learning institutions have developed bridge or enabling courses to help learners attain minimum level of pre-requisite qualifications to cope with the academic demands of a given programme of study.

## iii) Environmental Factors

Learning, for that matter any human behaviour, is a function of the person in relation to his/her environment. The importance and the role of the environment in which learning takes place need not be over emphasised. It means that we should look at a learner's autonomy and his/her ability to exercise autonomy from environmental perspective.

## iv) Operational and logistic support

The most important aspect of developing and sustaining the interest and motivation of distance learners is the efficiency with which an institution handles its operations and logistics. Timely admissions, clear schedules of dispatch of materials, assignments submission, counselling-tutoring and effective implementation of the schedules instill confidence in the learners and inspire them to study through the courses, even if the courses, are tough. On the contrary, a weak administration would create a chaos which in turn would de-motivate the learners, even though the courses may be very good and academically useful. For example, if the materials do not reach the students in time, the students will have serious problems in meeting the schedules of assignments submission and they won't be able to prepare themselves for the counselling session; and because of these and other related difficulties they may not like to appear in the examinations or even if they appear performance in the final examinations will be affected.

## v) Learning Support

Teacher's support at an appropriate time also facilitates learning. According to Baath (1979), learners learning at a distance need help in defining their goals, selecting appropriate learning materials, working through their learning activities and evaluating their progress. Sewart (1978) recognises learners' constant need for advice and support throughout their studies. The introduction of human element plays an important role in facilitating self-learning. Opportunities for ready access to a teacher (or an academic counsellor) who can answer the queries which might arise in the course of their study and motivate the learners to keep up their interest to study must be adequate and satisfactory.

Further, to enable the learners to cope up with their studies, institutional support of different kinds at all levels is absolutely necessary to provide proper learning environment to the isolated distance learners at all stages of pursuance of their independent study. Therefore, there should be efficient support services to the distance learners which can empower them by providing proper conditions under which they can learn best.

### 9.3.5 Measures for Promoting Self-learning

Jarvis, Holford and Griffin (1998) reviewed research studies conducted by various experts and concluded that some measures are needed in order to promote self-learning/self-directed learning. Important measures are as follows:

- Provide information on certain topics through different sources of information.
- Serve as a resource for an individual or a small group of learners on certain portion of learning content.
- Assist learners to assess their needs and competencies so that each learner can map out his learning path.
- Provide feedback on their learning plan.
- Locate available resource or secure new information on topics identified through need assessment.
- Build a resource collection of information, media and models related to a variety of topics or areas of study.
- Work with learners outside formal and group settings as a stimulator.
- Help them develop an attitude about and approach to learning that fosters independence.
- Organize discussions, prompt raising questions and promote participation in small group activities to stimulate interest in the learning experience.
- Help develop a positive attitude towards learning and self-directed inquiry.
- Manage a learning process that includes such activities as continuous diagnosis of needs, acquisition of continuous feedback and fostering of learner involvement.
- Serve as an evaluator of learner accomplishment both throughout and at the end of a learning experience.

The above measures, if ignored, would affect self-directed learning.

**Check Your Progress**

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

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit under “Answers to ‘Check Your Progress’ Questions”.

5) List out the factors that contribute to promotion of self-learning in the context of distance education.

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**9.4 SKILLS REQUIRED FOR SELF-LEARNING**

The learners should be advised on how to study on their own. Adequate skills for self-learning help the learners derive the greatest possible benefits from pedagogic activities like listening, viewing, speaking, reading and writing. They need to adopt essential strategies to learn independently and continue their study.

In this section we shall discuss, in brief, the study skills, reading skills and writing skills required by a learner for self-learning. The inputs in this section have been taken from the course materials of the Post-Graduate Diploma in Distance Education (PGDDE) and the *Handbook: How to Study* of IGNOU.

**9.4.1 Study Skills**

Study skills help the learner gain maximum from the learning materials. These skills demand readiness and active mental exercise on the part of the learner. Thus, the learner has to apply all his capabilities to effectively handle and process information he/she reads. These skills help the learners spend less time in studying and learn more.

There are two aspects of self-learning. One, the learning materials should help the learners work more effectively. So the learning materials are designed in such a way to offer the learners maximum learning experience. Second, the learners should develop adequate study skills so that they can get the maximum from the learning materials — be they printed text or non-print media.

Learners with adequate study skills can make important decisions about various aspects of their learning. These aspects include:

- How to study: preferred methods and media of learning.
- Where to study: convenient location(s) for studying materials.
- When to study: start/finish dates, and pace of learning.

Learning at a higher level relies upon a variety of basic learning skills. The learners adopt different approaches to study independently. In reality there is no one specific set of skills that constitutes effective studying. As there is no singular way of teaching or learning, there is not a ready-made formula of learning independently. Nevertheless, to become an autonomous learner you must improve your skills of acquiring knowledge

by reading, developing study techniques of your own, asking relevant questions (yourselves and others), participating in group discussion actively, taking notes, etc. Thus, the autonomous learner has to learn new learning behaviours to cope with his/her study.

It is difficult to make an exhaustive inventory of study skills. Considering the features of self-learning, we discuss here three vital concerns in developing effective study skills in autonomous learners. They are:

- When to study?
- Where to study?
- How much to study?

Let us discuss each concern in detail in the same order, as mentioned above.

**i) When to study:** To achieve the course objectives effectively and efficiently, the learner should plan his/her study time and spread it over a period of time. Taking other commitments and availability of spare time into consideration, one should learn as to how to plan one's own study. The learner should know about systematically planning and organising their studies. The learners should be made aware that being regular in their studies would help them retain and organise what they are studying.

Some adult learners might face problems in deciding when to study. Besides pursuing their studies, they have certain social, professional and family commitments to fulfill. Considering these commitments, they should plan their studies in such a way that they study on a regular basis and find some time from their busy schedule on daily basis. The point that we want to bring home is that there should be a regular schedule of study and nothing should be left to the examination time or the eleventh hour.

**ii) Where to study:** You might agree with us that a motivated, self-directed learner should be able to learn anywhere: in a quiet place like a library, in a crowded bus/train, in park. But let us be realistic. Most of us cannot entirely shut off our minds to distractions: environmental and psychological. By implication, the place of study should be as free as possible from such distractions as might steal away our attention. The place of study should be well-lit and properly ventilated. We should remember here that every learner may not get what he/she wants. Efforts, however, should be made to create conducive learning environment in the place of study.

**iii) How much to study:** The third step is to determine the amount of time to be spent in studying. It should be recognised that the amount of time we spend in studying will depend on the subject and the level of mastery we already have and that we want to attain. It also depends on whether you are a slow learner or not. It is, therefore, unrealistic to set a hard and fast rule about the amount of time we should spend on a specific subject. It varies from learner to learner. Fortunately, the more we plan our work the more time we get for deep thinking and reflection.

There are also other means which help us gain maximum from the learning materials. We shall discuss some of them here.

**a) Knowing the text:** The learners should know the various parts of the learning materials. Helping them know the parts of the learning materials can save their

time and effort. Here are a few suggestions that we should take note of while studying printed learning materials.

- *Survey the text:* A quick glance through the text helps us see how the teacher presents the content — whether he/she presents topic headings in bold letters or not; are there any headings in the margins too; whether there are diagrams, charts, graphs, etc.
- *Read the preface / introduction / foreward:* It contains the teacher's explanation of the learning material — his purpose/plan of writing the text, and his description of the organisation of the text. The preface also explains how the text is either different from others in the field or a further contribution to the field of knowledge.
- *Read the contents:* The list of contents will give us a comprehensive idea of what to expect from the learning materials. This also helps us to locate the topic(s) we want to read.
- *Glance through the index:* The index helps us identify whether or not what we need is included in the text. It really is a valuable aid, because it helps us find specific information that we need.
- *Check for a glossary:* A glossary of the key / crucial words is helpful because it gives us the meaning of specialised expressions, words or phrases used in the text.

- b) ***Interpretation of non-verbal items:*** By non-verbal items, we mean maps, charts, tables, graphs, etc., which help us understand the complex and abstract concepts. Some of us employ these techniques to make the ideas clearer. If we are given opportunities to work with various types of illustrative materials, we shall certainly be in a better position to make out meaning from what we are reading. We, therefore, should acquire the skill of learning from non-verbal items.

We need to gain skills in interpreting illustrative materials. Maps, charts and graphs are the items we generally use in our learning materials. Let us talk about some non-verbal items.

- *Maps:* There are many different types of maps, and each stresses particular feature of a bit of information. Each map has a key that needs to be interpreted correctly to get the relevant information. For example, political maps use colour coding and definite boundary line types to indicate political divisions, administrative divisions, etc. Usually, maps present keys indicating what various colours, lines, scale, etc., represent.
- *Graphs and charts:* These are used to present data concisely. Most of us have at one time or the other prepared a chart to exhibit some information. There are different types of charts and graphs. The kinds of information that can be charted are too numerous to state and also out of context here to list all the different types of charts, graphs and kinds of information. Our purpose is to give a general awareness of the use of charts and graphs for self-learning.

We should mention here that graph is more limited in what it can illustrate than a chart because the former is usually more structured and gives some specific information, while the latter is a broader display and it can display many different kinds of information at one and the same time.

- c) **Concept mapping:** When we study, we make a graphic representation of the topics (concepts) we are learning. This graph is the 'concept map' representing what we are going to study. Concept mapping is a learning strategy in which learners identify key concepts in the body of a subject matter and manage them in a meaningful way around the focus point. All the concepts are inter-linked with each other. Preparing a good concept map requires that we have the skill of critical thinking because we have to make insightful judgements on what formats, words and phrases best represent the information which we have gone through and what will help us to recall the information, whenever we need it.

Here is a technique we could use. We should:

- choose and determine the amount of information for studying;
- read through the whole material that has been chosen for studying;
- locate the central idea/theme of what is being read;
- re-read each paragraph to identify the main topic in each paragraph; and
- note down the central idea and the topics of the paragraphs studied in easily accessible format.

There is no single way to construct a concept map because what works with one learner may not necessarily work or work equally well with another. The test as to whether or not the concept map is correct comes when the learner uses it for study purposes and finds that it does help him/her to learn significant amount of information.

Related to this concept are outlining, note taking and summarising. These concepts will be discussed in Sub-section 9.4.3 of this unit.

### 9.4.2 Reading Skills

Different people use the term reading differently. Since the meaning of the word largely depends on the context in which it occurs, we should not, therefore, expect to find a single definition for reading.

Reading can be defined loosely as the ability to make sense of written or printed words. The learner uses the symbols to activate information from his/her memory and subsequently uses this information to arrive at a persuasive interpretation of written message. A broad definition that has been widely used and accepted is that reading is a process whereby a learner brings meaning to and gets meaning from printed text (the reading skill is related to the print/visual medium). This implies that learners bring their backgrounds, their experiences as well as their emotions in order to derive meaning from a learning text. If we are in conversation with someone, we can stop him/her and ask for explanations whenever, we need them. Similarly, when we have difficulties in reading, we need to interrogate the text. Since, in learning at a distance, the teacher is seldom available for consultation, the text is our only reference, and reading can, therefore, be described as our interrogation of or interaction with the learning materials.

Reading can be of two types: deep and surface. Some learners intend to reproduce the information to meet externally-imposed assessment demands, others may intend to understand what the writer was trying to communicate to them through the unit.

- A) **Stages in reading:** Keeping Barrett's (1972) taxonomy of reading comprehension as a model, we present here six stages a learner systematically passes through in the process of reading, when he/she moves from lower to higher level of learning.



The stages we have identified are:

- Recognition of words
- Association of meaning with symbols
- Literal comprehension
- Interpretation
- Critical reading
- Creative reading

Let us discuss each one of these stages in the given order.

- i) **Recognition of words:** By recognition of word, we mean the ability of the learner to translate orally or sub-vocally the written symbol into a spoken word. No reading can take place without recognising the word.

A majority of learners acquire the skill of word-recognition by the time they come to higher education. Even at the higher education level, they need consistent review and practice of the principles and procedures necessary for ease in word-recognition. Problems with word recognition may occur in any subject. Quite often in sciences a learner is faced with a number of new words with unknown pronunciations. These words have to be recognised, read, understood and learned.

- ii) **Association of meaning with symbols:** The learner may readily pronounce the word he/she is familiar with. A mathematical or scientific symbol often stands for a complex relationship, which may be as difficult to understand as abstract verbal symbols. When the learner comes across a new word and learns it, he/she recognises it in different contexts, and therefore, we say he/she has learnt a new concept. Let us take an example. A word like ‘*approximation*’ is used in Mathematics, English and Social Studies — in fact, a learner may come across it almost everywhere. Similarly, the word ‘*rational*’, for example, besides its general use in mathematics, is used in a special sense. There are words which have both highly generalised and technical meanings. There are also words which have only the technical meaning; they often belong to one particular area. Of course, with the passage of time such words also get generalised as they are used in more and more diverse contexts. All types of words have to be learnt because accurate communication takes place only when the teacher and the learner share a common understanding of the concept behind each word.

- iii) **Literal comprehension:** It involves important sub-skills — reading for facts and central ideas, noting down supporting arguments, etc. Various patterns of organization of details produce different effects, though they may be essentially the same. Learners, therefore, must learn not only to read for accurate literal understanding of individual facts but also to understand the particular relationship these facts may have with other facts in the learning material.

- iv) **Interpretation:** Interpretation takes the learner beyond the printed words and visuals by requiring him/her to put together ideas. It also requires the learner to see the connections between what he/she is reading now and his/her past reading and life experience. As an outcome of this process, the learner is able to make inferences and draw conclusions. In other words, he/she learns to understand implied meanings of the word or visual. This process of reading is required in all subject areas though with differing degrees of complexity.

- v) **Critical reading:** The evaluation aspect of the reading act, often called critical reading, requires the learner to depart from the printed word or visual in a different direction. At this stage, he/she makes judgements rooted in what he/she has read. His/her personal feelings and prejudice have little role to play, as he/she sorts out facts from opinions and evaluates the logic of the reasoning presented in the material he/she reads. The learner considers the relevance, authenticity and utility of factual material.
- vi) **Creative reading:** Creative reading uses divergent thinking skills to go beyond the literal comprehension, interpretation and critical reading levels. At this stage, the learner tries to come up with new or effective alternative ideas, solution, etc. to those presented by the teacher in the learning materials.

Every act of reading potentially affects not only every other act of reading but also the non-reading acts which a learner will perform. The simplest, most direct way in which creative reading affects the learner is in the growing confidence he/she acquires in the use of the skills. These skills, at a certain stage, become so natural to him/her that he/she develops an automatic approach. When he/she needs to skim, he/she automatically does so. When he/she needs to read for complete recall, he/she does it. Thus, /she learns to assimilate skills, concepts, attitudes derived from reading. At this stage, the learner comes to know how to get into a printed page, a map or a diagram, how to get what he/she wants from it and how to get out of it when anymore time spent on it would be a waste.

The skills involved at the various stages of the reading act can be grouped into the following three categories.

- Set purposes for reading, ability to survey material and determine an appropriate technique for the reading of any given piece of material.
- Ability to handle graphic and illustrative materials.
- Ability to locate, comprehend and combine information from a variety of learning resources.

### **B) SQ3R technique of reading**

Different learning materials require different approaches, depending on what the learners expected to get from them. The implication here is that the strategy should be flexible in tackling text materials. One strategy that gained wide acceptance is the SQ3R technique. SQRRR or “SQ3R” is a reading comprehension method named for its following five steps:

- Survey
- Question
- Read
- Recall
- Review

The method was introduced by Francis P. Robinson in 1946 in his book *Effective Study*. We shall discuss each one of these in the given order.

- i) **Survey:** It refers to a quick glance through the title page, preface, headings, etc. of a text. Surveying a text helps you grasp the main ideas. A glance at the title page may give you the:

- general subject area
- level of approach
- lesson writer's name, and
- date and place of publication

The preface/introduction of a learning material will give you more details. It will help you decide whether or not it deserves your attention. The structure of the lesson is yet another source you should never ignore when making a preliminary survey. A quick survey of the structure tells you what topics the teacher is dealing with and how the topics have been organised.

A survey of the structure will tell you instantly whether or not the text contains what you need. It will also help you save time and efforts by directing you straight to the most relevant learning points.

ii) **Question:** Your survey of the learning text will raise some questions in your mind. For example, after glancing at the title page, preface and structure, you might ask yourself.

- How far can I depend on this text?
- Will the text be helpful to me as its preface suggests?
- Why should the writer devote a whole unit or chapter to this or that topic?

These general questions are of some help to you in deciding how to treat the text.

When you turn from surveying the text as a whole to the specific theme/topic, your questions will become more specific. At times, the lesson writer himself will pose questions at the beginning or the end of a unit or lesson. Since questions are generally more helpful if given at the beginning of the unit, it is always better to take note of the questions stated at the beginning and at the end of the unit. We should not overlook the writer's questions which may prove very helpful to effective reading.

Having made your survey and started to question, you are now ready for the third step in the SQ3R technique, i.e. reading the text.

iii) **Read:** Reading text materials demands a critical mind. When we read a text, we apply our minds with all our critical skills. Unless we read 'actively' the questions which have been formulated can never be answered satisfactorily. Two important suggestions should be listed here:

- It is not advisable to make notes at this stage. We may tend to note down the writer's opinions/words rather than our own. This does not help understanding and learning.
- This is not the stage to underline words or phrases either. In our second reading we may find that whichever words / phrases have been underlined are not very critical for our purpose.

Keeping these two points in view, what we should do at the first reading is just to look for the main ideas and other details.

iv) **Recall:** Reading a text is not the final step in learning. It is, instead, the first step in the learning process. What is read needs to be recalled for its retention.

Deliberate attempts to recall what you have read will help improve your learning in at least three ways — help improve concentration, chance to remedy misinterpretation(s), and develop critical reading.

- v) **Review:** The purpose of reviewing is to check the validity of our recall. The best way to review is to do a quick repeat of the other four steps — survey, question, read and recall.

Having discussed the SQ3R technique of reading, we should be able to say whether or not we should strictly follow the logical order in which SQ3R is presented if we adopt this technique. Although the steps of SQ3R are in a logical and natural order, there may be overlaps and repetitions between them. For instance, even while the emphasis is on survey or 'read' we may still find ourselves asking questions or we may want to interrupt the third stage (i.e. read) for the purpose of recalling and reviewing or even for the purpose of repeating 'survey'. Nevertheless, there is no harm in adopting SQ3R in the same order.

The SQ3R technique need not necessarily be confined only to printed materials. With suitable modification in the stages, we can apply this technique to electronic media too. The stage we may have to change is the third one, i.e. read. This may be replaced by either 'listen to' or 'watch' depending on whether we are dealing with an audio or a video programme. The rest of what we discussed in relation to printed materials might as well be applied to electronic media.

### 9.4.3 Writing Skills

A self-directed learner spends much of his/her time either in reading the course materials, listening an audio programme, watching a video programme or in writing responses to the assignments based on the course materials. Thus, writing skills are essential for him/her. Here, we shall discuss some of the techniques involved in taking/making notes, summarizing and outlining what we have studied.

**Note-making/taking:** Note-making helps us mainly in two ways:

- It keeps us active while we are learning (and thus aiding to our concentration).
- It helps us have a record of what we have studied (irrespective of the media).

If we really want to have a grip on what we have read, heard (audio) or watched (video), it is always helpful to put a few words on paper than to depend on hazy memories. The memories may drift away in course of the time unless you nail them down with words. And you can keep your written record as a permanent reminder.

**Note-keeping:** There may be many ways of keeping notes. Ideally we should arrange our notes in an order, so that the notes on a given topic are kept together — whether we collect them from reading printed text, listening to lecturers or watching video programmes. In such a situation, bound note books are of little help because we shall be forced to store our notes in the order we wrote them. With a loose leaf binder, on the other hand, we can re-arrange our sheets of papers, at times we can remove some, re-write some, add new materials, etc.

In making notes, you should always remember that you need to put in only the essentials. You should not end up with putting together the mini-text. In making notes on note cards, you can keep in mind the following:

- If you are quoting an author's exact words, make sure you put them in quotation marks.

- Try to summarise what you have read or heard but take care that you are stating facts, not opinions.
- If you are giving your or someone else’s opinion, make sure you record this on the card so that you will not confuse the opinion with fact.
- Try not to make notes on matters of common knowledge.
- Do not make notes on the same information twice.

Now, we shall talk about the ways of making notes. There are mainly two ways of making notes.

- Summarising
- Outlining.

We shall touch upon each of these below.

**Summarising:** Summary is a condensed version of the original. A good summary ought to be brief and ought to include only essential information. The main idea of the paragraph or the central idea of an article and the important facts should be stated not necessarily in the sequence presented in the passage (the sequence can be followed in the summary only if it is essential). In a summary we need to include only the information stated in the unit/lesson or article and not your opinions or what you think should have been included.

**Outlining:** Normally, we present the essential point in an almost diagrammatic fashion. This is called outlining. Where possible try to outline rather than summarise what we read or listen to. In an outline we can list even minute details which may not be possible in a summary. Here are a few guidelines for outlining whatever you read, see or listen to:

- Get a skeleton for your outline from the writer headings. Expand each heading into a meaningful sentence containing the main idea of the section or sub-section it belongs to.
- If the headings are only a few, you need to look at the topic, sentence or each paragraph in the section. It probably carries a main idea that you will need to put in your notes to help develop the argument. In case, you want to include important details, you can present them in parenthesis.
- Once you pick out the main ideas you can indent them from the margin according to their relative importance. For example, you can start the main items at the margin, indent second-order items by say half an inch; third order items go in by another half inch and so on. An illustration is given below.



You should not, however, indent too little or too much. If indentation is too little, the relationship won’t be clear and you may not have room for your notes.

It should not be construed that an outline could be made only by indentation. You can always use letters, numbers, bullets, etc to outline a given topic. Generally the following norm is observed for outlining:

- Roman numerals (I, II, etc.) for the main topics, putting a period after Roman numeral.
- Capital letter (A, B, etc.) for sub-topics with a period after each capital letter.
- Ordinary Arabic numerals (1, 2, etc.) for details under sub-topics and small letters under the details for less important points with a period after each number and letter.
- Roman numbers, capital letters, ordinary numbers, and small letters in straight vertical lines.
- Each topic begins with a capital letter, whether it is a main topic, a sub-topic or a detail.
- Topics are usually phrases, sometimes sentences. They should not be mixed.

**Check Your Progress**

**Note:** a) Write you answer in the space given below.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit under “Answers to ‘Check Your Progress’ Questions”.

6) What are the important skills required for self-learning in distance education?

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## 9.5 SUPPORTING SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING: ROLE OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

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Throughout the world, communication technologies have acquired a central and powerful role in people’s learning. Communication technologies provide self-development opportunities for all through self-learning and empower them to become well-informed individuals of the society. The technologies which developed as part of the processes of industrialization became educational means for lifelong education. Technology can be used for managing both information and activities. It plays crucial role in self-directed learning.

Communication technologies are valuable means of learning, and provide and promote knowledge, skills and attitudes. Technology will change the teacher’s role from dispenser of knowledge to learners to that of facilitator of acquisition of knowledge from a variety of sources, in an individualised way. Technology, if properly designed, implemented and monitored can increase the productivity, in terms of both quality and quantity of self-learning.

One of the important initiatives for self-directed learning may be to establish a learning group which will permit learners to benefit from shared experiences of a group engaged in the same study. This has become more important for developing countries where all the learners may not have home-based access to modern communication technologies. The learning group (besides arranging affordable access to technologies) will provide opportunities to share and assess their ideas and points of view with others in the group. The group will provide a solid source of support for discussion and obtaining answers to important questions and believing that they could successfully complete the course. In fact, the learning group can contribute to the feeling that this was a 'real' class.

Communication technology provides the capacity for greater interaction, both immediate (such as in computer-assisted instruction) and delayed interaction (such as through audio/video cassettes). To gain from various technologies, the learners should have the intention (mental and psychological readiness for learning) and the skill to use interaction effectively to accomplish the objectives. They should involve themselves in various cognitive tasks in terms of listening, viewing, reading, speaking and any combination of the above. Meaningful involvement of the learners in those tasks will keep them alert and active in their learning.

We have discussed the limitations and potential of different technologies in Unit 6 of Block 2 of this course. Our aim here is not to discuss the role of any individual technology in learning at a distance. Some technologies permit greater degree of autonomy than others. But we are tempted to refer 'computer' as a significant technology in distance education. Computer can work as a gateway to resources, collaborative learning and individual achievements. It provides a mode of communication which increases the possibility of learning independently.

Computer has brought with it some very interesting possibilities for self-learning. One of the applications of computer is to access internet which is one of the most important technological innovations to reach individual users, thus giving tremendous capability to them to learn individually. And this it does at a low cost. It provides learners access to the global world of electronic (computer) communication. Simply by connecting a computer to a telephone line, through a modem, the learner can obtain access to other computer networks, including the internet. Education provided automatically by computers, connected to networks, is capable of adjusting to the requirements of every learner.

The learners learning through distance mode need orientation and training in the meaningful use of communication technology and technology-based sources of learning. They can be provided self-learning manuals giving step-by-step instructions to use communication technology-based components. It is important to try and understand as to how technology is to be effectively used in acquiring knowledge, skills and attitudes. Appropriate use of technology in self-learning necessitates changes in the way learners engage themselves in the learning process.

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## 9.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we have analysed the characteristics of distance learners such as age, gender, social status, economic status, educational status, geographical location, language skills, academic traditions and disabilities which have implications for distance learning. The common problems faced by distance learners include: studying in isolation, lack of

motivation, poor study skills, difficulty in striking a balance between study and other commitments, poor course design, inadequate institutional support and the like.

We also discussed the concept of self-learning/self-directed learning. It refers to attending to, acquiring and understanding information independently, without or with little support of the teacher. Self-learning is managed and directed by the learner himself/herself. We have discussed the various characteristics and stages of self-learning. We have focused on the various factors influencing self-learning such as motivation, learning materials, educational background, environmental factors and learning support. The institutional arrangements that we have discussed relate to motivating the students including pre-enrolment counselling; efficient operations and logistics that take care of timely dispatch of materials, handling of assignments, organising tutorial-cum-counselling sessions; and practice of sound pedagogic principles in the design, development, implementation of academic programmes.

Further we have dealt with skills required for self-learning — study skills, reading skills and writing skills. In the last section we have discussed the role of communication technology in self-learning and argued that the existing and the emerging communication technologies have contributed to the effectiveness of distance education in general and to self-learning in particular. Computer and the internet are referred to as important technological innovations serving the cause of self-learning on a large scale at present which will continue in future as well.

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## 9.7 ANSWERS TO ‘CHECK YOUR PROGRESS’ QUESTIONS

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- 1) As a norm, distance learners of any institution or country do not constitute a homogenous community. They differ in their age, gender, socio-economic status, learning styles, geographical distribution, educational background, etc.

In India, distance learners have certain other special characteristics too. The caste and class divisions, centuries old poverty, illiteracy, prejudices, cultural traits, the rural-urban divides and belief-systems further differentiate the learners.

Language issues, particularly the use of English as a medium of instruction, academic traditions having a bearing on the learners’ attitude towards teaching-learning, and the disabilities of different types have greatly influenced the profile of distance learners in India.

- 2) We think that in a developing country like India, the following problems may seriously disrupt and disturb the study of distance learners:
- i) Non-receipt of learning-materials in time (this will demotivate the learners, besides upsetting their schedule of submitting assignments, etc.).
  - ii) Badly designed, poor quality learning materials (inappropriate design, wrong choice of content, or pitching it at the wrong level would cause early dropping out).
  - iii) Non-serious approach to assignments and other forms of formative, continuous evaluation that would misdirect the learners.
  - iv) Non-response and misleading responses to student queries;
  - v) Lack of academic rigour leading to fall in standards and eventual disrepute of the courses and the system would affect the enrolment negatively.



- 3) Self-directed learning in distance education is characterised by the following features:
  - i) Learner-centred approach to learning;
  - ii) Learner's responsibility for his learning;
  - iii) Flexible provision of education to meet individual needs, interests and requirements;
  - iv) Use of specially designed and prepared learning materials.
- 4) The characteristic stage styles of self-directed learning include: Dependent, Interested, Involved and Self-directed.
- 5) The factors that contribute to promotion of self-learning in distance education are:
  - i) Intrinsic motivation of adult learners
  - ii) Effective self-instructional (learning) materials
  - iii) Educational background of learners
  - iv) Autonomy of learning
  - v) Learning support made available to learners.
- 6) Study skills, reading skills and writing skills are the three important skills required for self-learning in distance education. If the major medium of instruction is audiovisual, through cassettes, radio broadcast and telecast media, or if there are audiovisual cassettes, radio broadcast and telecast supplementing print medium, then reading, listening and viewing skills are also equally important for self-learning.

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## **9.9 UNIT END EXERCISES**

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You may write brief notes or full-length answers to the questions given here in your own interest. Such notes or answers might help you during your preparation for examination.

## Unit End Questions

- 1) What are the characteristics, problems and expectations of distance learners. (1000 words).
- 2) Explain the concept and stages of self-directed learning. How do you promote it? (1000 words).
- 3) What are the advantages and disadvantages of self-directed learning? (500 words).
- 4) Discuss the factors influencing self-directed learning. (1000 words).
- 5) Discuss the skills required for self-directed learning (1000 words).
- 6) Explain how communication technology support self-directed learning (500 words).



## Questions for Critical Reflection

- 1) While there is in-built teacher in the so called self-instructional material directing the distance learners all through the text in it, it is difficult to accept the concept of self-directed learning. Offer your critical comments on the statement.

### Activity



Recall at least three major problems which you had faced in pursuing the BED Programme of IGNOU and record below how they were resolved, including the efforts made by you.

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