

The Acculturation of 'Open' Materials and the Enhancement of Learning

Dr. Kandarpa Das, Post Graduate Correspondence School, Gauhati University,
Assam, India

E-mail: kandarpa4@rediffmail.com

Dr. Uttara Debi, Post Graduate Correspondence School, Gauhati University,
Assam, India

E-mail:uttaradebi@yahoo.com

I. GETTING INTO THE CULTRE OF 'SELF-LEARNING'

This paper deals with the experience of organising course-content in the self-learning format. A few preliminary remarks describing the setting of our work are necessary to clarify the issues confronting us. The main focus of our study is the postgraduate programme in English offered by our institute. This programme, being 'open', does not require the learner to have a specialised background of competence in English Literature. The learners, initially including mostly those who would have pursued a 'private' programme of study, now increasingly consists of many who graduated in other disciplines. A majority of those who enrol for this programme are graduates who did not seek admission into the conventional programme in English because in all likelihood they want to pursue more than one programme simultaneously. Many of the learners are English language teachers of schools (often with an English Major at college) or are otherwise employed.

Such experience as sought to be recounted here is intended to foreground the 'cultural' space that Distance Learning requires in order to be properly effective. The presumption here is that learning and teaching are transactions related to a culturally inflected learning-space. This aspect takes on added significance when a traditional, campus-based university like Gauhati University, an institution of local pre-eminence, incorporates the system of distance, off-campus learning.

II. THE NEED FOR ACCULTURATION

Acculturation is important to the designing of self-learning materials in that it takes account of the contours of the local settings of the learner as well as the learner-profiles.[Brown 1980 :158] In the conventional, face-to-face learning system, the learner-group was homogenous, this aspect having been taken care of through the modes of admission into the programme. The 'open' system does not assume uniformity of learner-profile - this being part of its strength - and instead devises methods of nurturing "self-learning" in the learner, thus turning the focus onto the final goals of the learner's enrolment. In that sense, 'open' learning aims at the 'independent' learner. [Stella et al 2004: 152] Again, the independent learner ideally is self-reliant and undertakes independent reference-work where required during the programme of study. In our local conditions, where the 'open' system is a recent introduction, 'self-learning' composes a new culture and at present the tendency for learners who do not feel confident with the SLM provided to them, is to drop out of the programme altogether. This tendency cannot be addressed by any self-consciously 'high-quality' material. It is quite clear that the profile of the local learner must be in the forefront of the SLM-designer. The weight to be given to this feature is compounded by the fact that the 'open' system is structured around the heterogeneity of the learner-group. Unless this issue is squarely confronted, the learner in the 'open' system, who is additionally sensitive to methods of inclusion and exclusion, tends to drop out. This may be the reason why open institutions of learning face a perennial problem of student-retention.

Acculturation is important to the extent that 'local' trends have to be taken care of in the introductory stages of a new system of education. Rather than a sudden shift to a universally 'open' system of education, it was seen to be more appropriate to create self-learning material

(SLM) sensitive to the practices of teaching and learning locally regarded as guaranteeing intellectual gains. By this we mean to suggest that the SLM we envisaged as being suitable to local conditions had to take into consideration multiple aspects of institutional infrastructure, modes of delivery, and the existing dual-mode context within which such SLMs would be operative.

III. ADDRESSING PRIOR KNOWLEDGE REQUIREMENTS

Prior knowledge requirements of the discipline for learners in open systems, who need to be encouraged to learn creatively, is to be addressed constructively. At the postgraduate programme in English literary study for open learning, the problem lies with the heterogeneous set of learners in the programme: learners from rural settings, from urban and semi-urban settings, from other disciplines (both the arts and the science subjects), learners enrolled simultaneously in two programmes of study, learners with a vernacular-medium background, learners with limited exposure to English, and learners with limited command over the language.

Through a survey, conducted among students of our institute deliberate focus was on the 'unit' on Milton's *Paradise Lost (Bks I & II)*. All respondents felt that the unit was properly organised and except for a small minority (15%), was considered to have enriched their reading of Milton's epic. This text is especially inaccessible to local students since it is culturally distant (the style, the vocabulary, the allusions, the coinage, latinisms, Christian references, etc.).[Brown 1980 : 159] The issue of prior knowledge assumes great importance here in view of this cultural gap. Accordingly, the 'unit' gives a rough sketch of Milton's personal details including his travels, his education, his politics, and his works. The text could not be included due to obligations of length so short summaries had to be included. Additional, highlighted material pointing away from a purely textual focus to more 'theoretical' concepts of author-text relationship, literary conventions, the problems of representation, the postcolonial readings available to us in this part of the world, and so on.

The students who responded to the questionnaire, supplied to them, were asked to make direct references to the 'unit' in hand. This helped us to gauge the involvement of the student with the course and thus to 'place' the response. The presumption on our side was that the learner is encountering this material for the first time; prior knowledge was presumed to be negligible. The response of learners from rural settings showed one-third of them did not find the material enriching their understanding of Milton's epic. More than sixty percent learners from the same background found the material enriching. Against the certainty of poor-quality books and library services in the rural sector, this information was heartening. The negative response came from those who were not first-time learners in English literature. The reason behind this feeling may have stemmed from other perceptions of institutional study material although the high percentage does not exclude other possibilities of limited information.

This aspect can be stretched to the natural cultural boundary surrounding Christian theological knowledge. The body of learners cannot be expected to be familiar with religious details of Christian eschatology. SLM should thus carry sections explaining such areas obscure to non-Christians. The other area needing greater elaboration may concern the republican sentiments behind Milton's political allegiances which guide his representation of Satan and Pandemonium in particular.

IV. SETTING LEARNING GOALS IN LITERARY STUDY

Perhaps the most important aspect of the teaching-learning process that had to be addressed concerns examinations. The SLM has to be directly relevant to the context of learning with a focus on examinations. The compulsions set up by this fact had a direct bearing on the questions that had to be incorporated into the text of the print-material. We were clearly aware of the fact that the learner would wish to conduct her/his study in the light of the questions given in printed

form. Thus all questions printed in the SLM were likely to be matched against what would be set in the examinations and the 'quality' adjudged accordingly.

A balance had to be achieved between opening up the field of literary study and restricting the course-content to what is necessary for the examinations. Doing reference-work is one of the main goals of teaching postgraduate-level literary study. A device used in our print-SLM was to highlight additional information, citing sources, which would be of interest to the student. For e.g., the main text is interspersed with referential commentary or critical or comparative material so as to open up the field for the learner who then is sensitised to the methods of literary study.[Stella et al 2004: 153]

Conceptualizing an 'open' system of learning proved to be especially difficult for educators who are familiar with the face-to-face, formal arrangements of classroom teaching. If judged against absolute standards, this creates many of the deficiencies marking our SLM in terms of style of writing, of arrangement of the course-content, of meeting deadlines of delivery, and of shortfall with reference to the quantum of information to be included in the SLM. While the situation will be remedied with better revisions in a matter of months from the present time, we have taken feedbacks from some of our students (around 30 of them) to pinpoint the exact nature of the noted deficiencies.

In the survey that we conducted among some of our students, about 80% of the respondents felt that our SLM helped them with ideas of what to expect in the examinations. This point is of great importance to us due to the long-ingrained habits of learning among students studying in local schools and colleges. The response regarding exam-preparation is an important indicator of the overall relevance of the SLM for our students and indeed was a result of the manner in which we had set out the different sets of questions: "self-assessment questions" (SAQs) and "Check Your Progress" (CYPs) ones. The first category contained questions of detail making it necessary for the learner to check with basic concepts and assumptions, while the CYPs were the more 'formal', 'difficult' ones that made the learner revise the reading of the texts in accordance with reference-work through related materials. This latter set would help the learner to anticipate the normal standard of university examinations. Even while the seemingly undue importance given to 'examinations' as part of a system of learning may be striking, it was a matter which went to the core of quality-assurance concerns since other extraneous factors - not integral to discussions of open learning but related to market-oriented policies - foreground assessment and evaluation problems of educational institutions [Stella et al 2004: 149-150].

Another piece of information which needed to be gained was the level of language used in the SLM, which is a decisive factor in opening up the content to the student. Competence in English language is a deterring factor for most students in the country. In Assam, where we are situated, the case is similar to the rest of the country and is applicable even to those who are admitted into the older university department. Our questionnaire asks whether the language of the SLM is 'difficult'; it is also asked whether the level of the language is "suitable for a postgraduate course in English". Here the interest was in dealing both with the popular conception of what a postgraduate course should be like and what the levels of confidence and competence of the student who uses the language actually are. So even while the student finds it difficult to adjust to the level of the language in which the SLM is written, s/he acknowledges it to be suitable. Affective factors and the perception of a course are important inputs for study-material design. [Brown 1980: 160] Such a perception is crucial in helping the student to accept 'difficulty' as a guarantee of quality and thus indirectly being motivated to perform better. In our feedback forms we therefore find it encouraging to find the almost unanimous opinion that even while the language-level is considered to be difficult, it is appropriate for the programme. The very same respondents felt too that the language should be made simpler. Such feedback confirms the fact that the general awareness of the learners holds much scope for the extension of high-quality higher education.

With assessment and evaluation getting a high profile in learners' perceptions, it was essential to know whether our students found our SLM capable of giving proper guidance for students to

perform well in their exams and internal assessment procedures. The respondents in our minor survey were almost (55% v.45%) equally divided on the choice of whether the SLMs "fulfilled the goals of teaching M.A.English". While all the respondents rated the SLM as "helpful" (except one respondent who did not), almost all found counselling by the teacher a necessary accompaniment. This can be partly explained on the basis of the novelty of the 'open' system which provides for self-learning as against the older passive form of learning by rote and dependence on the teacher. To the options given as markers of the advantages of distance education (the design of the study material; the contact programmes; the facility of counselling; library support; the number of chances allowed for improving examination results), most respondents tended to prefer the contact sessions as the most helpful feature of the programme. All of the above tends to show our SLM in a limited role, poised somewhere between 'guide' and friend. The reason to be entered here is that our SLM did not take into its purview the requirement of prior knowledge for the study of English.

V. THE LEARNING PATHWAY IN LITERARY STUDY

English literary study in a region like ours is possible only within the parameters defined by the culture of learning prevailing here. While better known open universities like the Delhi-based Indira Gandhi National Open University maintain their own systems of benchmarking and formulate their principles on the basis of experiences of those who are involved with it, the situation that obtains in more far-flung areas like Assam and the Northeast, literary study of English has to be carried on according to principles in synchronous agreement with the parameters of a learning environment that local learners respond to. Although this may sound like a truism, our institution found it expedient to infuse the principles of "self-learning" into an environment charged with teacher-centric modes of thinking and pedagogy. This translates into fashioning arrangements of learner-support services which allow learners to engage with the curriculum on their own- to cite one example. It also means that more support be given to the facility with which open-system learners grasp unfamiliar concepts so that this initial understanding is turned around to a greater facility and ease with language-usage. Only such methods can aid the open learners. We can support this finding with the results of our survey where the learner was asked to choose from a set of options the correct statement of the theme of a passage in the 'unit' which dealt with critical commentaries of *Paradise Lost* by eminent critics. Of the acceptable responses, the larger number came from a vernacular-medium, rural background while a slightly smaller number (45% v 36%) came from an urban environment with more exposure to English language. Of the unacceptable responses, the majority came from an urban setting. It can be inferred that though language-competence is an obstacle to be overcome by both learner and teacher working in tandem through improvised methods of writing assignments, almost all the students (barring one) who responded to our survey found the language suitable to a postgraduate course which helped them to improve their own usage. This answer came despite the fact that almost all students (barring one) thought that the language should have been made "simpler".

The sectioning of course-content in English Literature needs to be taken up much more strongly than current reviews of the goals of open learning would suggest. Educators belonging to this background would appreciate the need to opt out of traditional modes of arranging course-content along author-centric, chronologically demarcated lines. Literary study is not linear in the sense that it 'progresses' step-by-step like more scientific, technical disciplines. The discipline needs to be organised, for the very specific goals of opening up the discourse to learners with heterogeneous backgrounds, in more learner-friendly ways that allow comparative studies, and lateral thinking [Stella et al 2004: 151].

VI. REMEDIAL MEASURES

We have found it expedient to adopt, over time and with the expansion of institutional facilities, to refer learners to local ideas and concepts. Library resources have to accommodate books and

multimedia material which creates an enriched learning environment. Web-based resources are already being provided to learners. Dictionaries and encyclopaedia are added resources although the access to them is dictated by cultural attitudes. Vernacular literature is an important source for the enhancement of learning despite the language-gap because it can give analogies and points of comparison which finally help to bridge the cultural distance. (*Paradise Lost* can be made accessible by a properly coordinated comparative review of the local epics.) Articles drawn from popular culture (cartoons, films) can enhance learning. A more extensive remedial measure directly targetting the problem of prior knowledge is the creation of 'bridge material' which will be of major help to learners with little or no prior background in the discipline. For those who have crossed over from other disciplines, or who have not had the privilege of access to ample reference-literature, such 'bridge material' incorporates the necessary background knowledge which allows comprehension at the higher levels. For instance, to help in the reading of *Paradise Lost*, such material carries related extracts from the Bible, as well as explanations of the Western epic tradition.

Within the ambit of learner-support services, academic counsellors adopt novel techniques of conducting discussions and holding film-shows that relate to curricular texts. Visual aids such as drawings, paintings and reference-material from related areas go a long way towards minimizing culture-shock.[Brown 1980: 159]

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