

Online Discussion Group for Pre service Teachers: An ODL Tool for Life Skills Based Education

Skills Development, Skills Development for National Development

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The introduction of life skills education was in response to the need to reform traditional education systems, which appear to be out of step with the realities of modern social and economic life. The role of the teacher in life skills education is to facilitate the participatory learning of the group members rather than conduct lectures in a didactic style. But, as in all groups, good practice requires leader training which is of paramount importance to the success of the experience. In a classroom setup, it is difficult for the teacher educators to equip pre service teachers with life skills. Teacher education programmes are highly structured and time bound. The limitation of the present teacher education programme is preparation of the pre service teachers for formal system of education only without giving any glimpses of the ODL environment which covers a large group of the out of school students' population. So, we need a platform where pre service teachers as well as teacher educators can come together and share their experiences in a mode that suits their time and availability. So in spite of being a formal teacher education program every B Ed course in India would benefit if we are able to encourage the pre-service teachers to learn on their own in an environment contrived by the teacher educator. This would be akin to an ODL environment.

The paper discusses the benefits of an Online Discussion group hivaidseuindia@yahoogroups.com as an Asynchronous Mode of Communication in order to familiarize Pre-service teachers at Army Institute of Education, Delhi Cantt. to an ODL environment. It also discusses how in a loosely structured ODL environment, these Pre-service teachers were taught to develop Life skills- covertly. It cites examples wherein it becomes apparent that by its very nature the discussion group turned out to be a platform where pre-service teachers were gaining Life Skills.

INTRODUCTION

Global and societal changes have influenced the lives of young and these changes are likely to affect them in the future as well. The rapid social change, consequent upon modernisation, urbanisation, globalisation and the media boom, has made the lives of young people, their expectations, values and outlook very different from those of older generations. Today, young adolescents lack life skills to help them deal with the increasing demands and pressures. The threat of AIDS pandemic and the fast growing risk of drug abuse among adolescents and the youth demand urgent efforts for life skill development among them. It aims at developing various skills among learners to empower them to face the challenges of life. Development of life skills among students has been an important objective of the school curriculum since long, but very little has been done to realize this objective. That the teacher themselves need to develop skills to realize the objective of skill building among students is yet to receive adequate attention of the teacher preparation process. The teacher needs to be equipped with core life skills like *communication* and *interpersonal skills*, *decision making* and *critical thinking skills*, coping and self-management skills etc. But do teacher educators have time to impart life skills to pre service teachers in a traditional classroom set up? Does our teacher education system prepare teachers for traditional as well as open and distance learning environments? Teacher education programmes are highly structured and time bound. ODL environment is very important as it caters to the needs of the major group of the 'out of school population'. As teacher educators, we need to provide some opportunities to pre service teachers where they can share their experiences in a mode that suits their time and availability. So in spite of being a formal teacher education program, every B Ed course in India would benefit if we are able to encourage the pre-service teachers to learn on their own in an environment contrived by the teacher educator. This would be akin to an ODL environment.

This paper discusses the benefits of an Online Discussion group hivaidseuindia@yahoogroups.com as an Asynchronous Mode of Communication in order to familiarize Pre-service teachers at Army Institute of Education, Delhi Cantt. to an ODL environment. It also discusses how in a loosely structured ODL environment, these pre-service teachers were taught to develop Life skills- covertly. It cites examples wherein it becomes apparent that by its very nature the discussion group turned out to be a platform where pre-service teachers were gaining Life Skills.

Life Skills Based Education – the hows & whys

A skill is a learned ability to do something well. Life skills are abilities, individuals can learn that will help them to live a fruitful life. In other words life skills are those competencies that assist people in functioning well in the environments

in which they live. Skills are learned in sequential steps related to the age and stage of development of the young person.

Life skills are “the abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enables individuals to deal effectively with demands and challenges of everyday life” (WHO, 1997, p.1). It further encompasses thinking skill, social skill and negotiation skill. It also helps the young people to develop and grow into well behaved adults. Life skills enable individuals to translate knowledge, attitudes and values into actual abilities – i.e. “what to do and how to do it”. Life skills are abilities that enable individuals to behave in healthy ways, given the desire to do so and given the scope and opportunity to do so. Effective acquisition and application of life skills can influence the way we feel about ourselves and others, and equally will influence the way we are perceived by others.

Life skills education is a value addition programme for the youth to understand self and able to assess their skills, abilities and areas of developments. This also enables them to analyze their capacity to enhance the function in a most productive way. Life skills education allows the youth get along with other people, able to adjust with their environment and making responsible decision, which also incorporate to build up their values and communicate effectively. The *main objective of life skills education* is to enable the learner to develop a concept of oneself as a person of worth and dignity. It should help one to understand oneself and lead to growth in personal responsibility.

UNICEF promotes the understanding that the life skills approach can be successful, if the following are taken together:

a) The Skills – This involves a group of psychosocial and interpersonal skills which are interlinked with each other. For example, decision making is likely to involve creative and critical thinking components and value analysis.

b) Content – To effectively influence behaviour, skills must be utilized in a particular content area. “What are we making decisions about?” Learning about decision making will be more meaningful if the content is relevant and remains constant.

c) Methods – Skills-based education cannot occur when there is no interaction among participants, It relies on groups of people to be effective. Interpersonal and psychosocial skills cannot be learned from sitting alone and reading a book.

There are 35 life skills identified by Hendricks (1998) as necessary for individuals to lead a productive and satisfying life. These skills are divided on the basis of familiar four H's from the 4-H Clover that represent Head, Heart, Hands, and Health.

Life Skills Based Education in an ODL Environment

In present circumstances, teachers are not only expected to understand the importance of life skills but also to realize that life skills can be imparted by creating a stimulating environment. Teachers need to provide young people opportunities where they must analyse different issues, alternatives available, choosing an alternative/alternatives keeping in mind different consequences, evaluating a decision etc. Life skills are needed by young people studying in ‘formal schools’ as well as by ‘out of school population’. It is becoming imperative that teacher education institutions must prepare pre service teachers to take up new roles and responsibilities. How can we expect pre service teachers to understand the nuances of ‘formal system of education’ as well as ‘ODL environment’ when all the B.Ed. colleges in India prepare pre service teachers for formal system of education only without giving them any glimpses of ODL environment? Most teacher education programmes provide little scope for student-teachers to reflect on their experiences and thus fail to empower teachers as agents of change (NCF 2005). Teacher education institutions need to take a lead role in this transformation of the society. Lecture based information as well as rote learning methods cannot be used for imparting life skills. The participatory method like *Asynchronous Online Discussion* is especially important in providing such opportunities to the pre service teachers as well as teacher educators. This experience can help pre service teachers not only to gain in terms of life skills but also to understand the nuances of the ODL environment.

In the light of the foregoing discussion, author created an online discussion group hivaidseuindia@yahoogroups.com on February 11, 2007. It is an initiative in this direction to develop life skills covertly among pre service teachers. There are a number of issues being discussed related to HIV/AIDS and school life experiences. There are 67 members in the ‘Discussion Group’ who are either studying or have studied at Army Institute of Education, Delhi Cantt. In this paper only **ONE** topic on *Sex Education* along with its responses, is selected.

For this study, author selected six life skills from the Targeting Life Skills model (Hendricks, 1998) that can be developed through *online discussion group*. The selected life skills described in Table 1 are (a) decision making, (b) Critical Thinking, (c) Effective Communication, (c) Accepting differences, (d) Leadership, and (e) Self-responsibility. These skill categories are further defined by 16 outcome indicators which reflect/indicate that a particular life skill(s) has been developed in the participant pre service teacher as a result of participating in an online discussion group. These outcome indicators of identified life skills are based on the outcome indicators developed by Sandra J. Bailey and Mary Y. Deen (2002) in *Development of Web-Based Evaluation System: A Tool for Measuring Life Skills in Youth and Family Programs*. Their Life Skills Evaluation System uses 8 of the 35 life skills identified by Hendricks (1998).

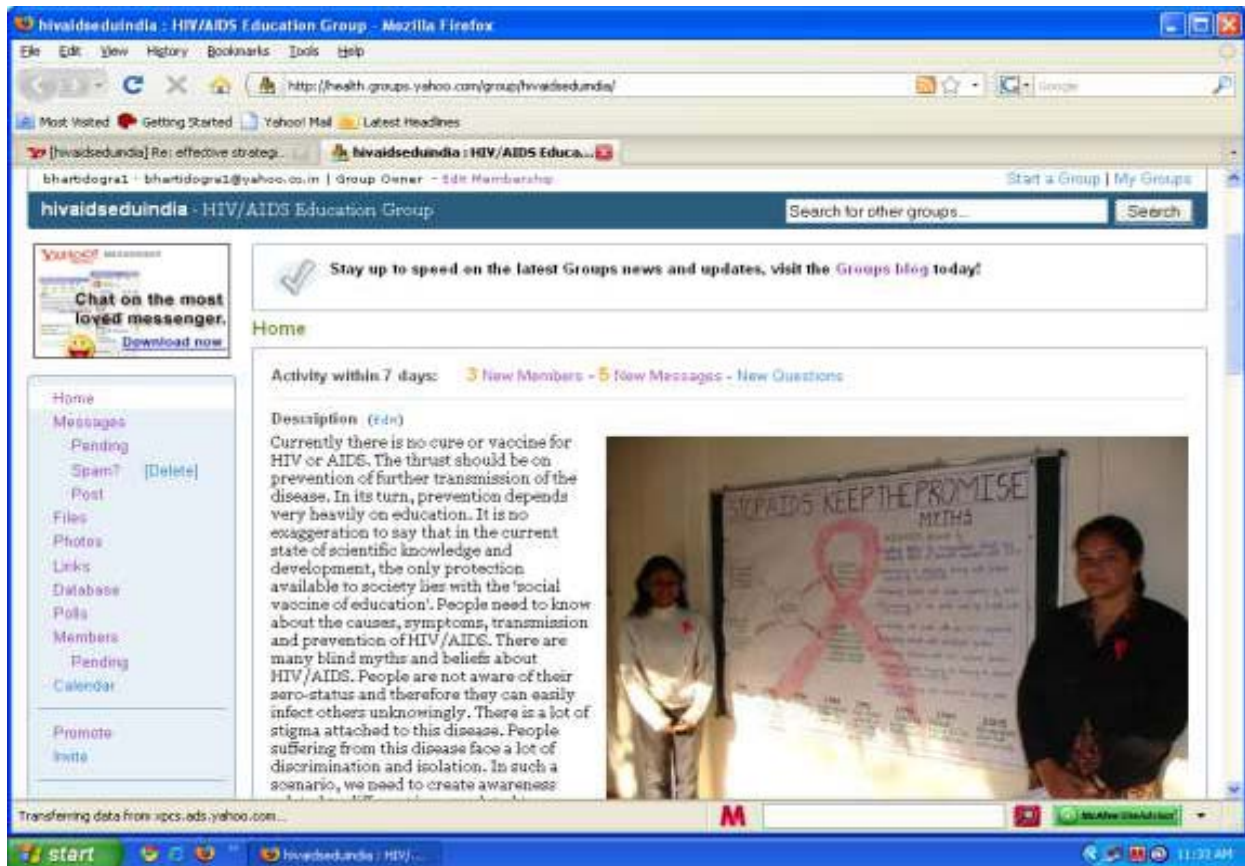
The outcome indicators of the selected **six** life skills were first defined and then nicknamed (assigned short names) for convenience like the three decision making outcome indicators were shortened to **(DM1)**, **(DM2)**, and **(DM3)**.

Selected Life Skills and Outcome Indicators in an Online Discussion Group

S. No.	LIFE SKILL	DEFINITION	INDICATORS IN AN ONLINE DISCUSSION GROUP
1.	Decision making	To deal constructively with decisions about our lives or Choosing amongst several alternatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •List my alternatives before making a decision (DM1) •Think about what might happen because of my decision (DM2) •Evaluate decisions I have made (DM3)
2.	Critical thinking	Ability to analyse information and experiences in an objective manner. It can help us recognise and assess the factors that influence attitudes and behaviour, such as media and peer pressure influences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Listing options/alternatives /choices related to different issues being discussed (CT1) •Understanding the consequences (pros and cons) of each alternative/choice before making any decision(CT2) •Proposing evidence for an argument or for links with other issues (CT3) •Showing connections among ideas; drawing appropriate conclusions by deduction or induction, generalizing, explaining (but not describing), and hypothesizing (CT4) •Proposing, discussing, or evaluating possible actions (CT5) (Bullen, 1997)
3.	Effective Communication	The ability to express, both verbally and non-verbally, in ways that are culturally acceptable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The exchange of written thoughts, information, or messages (EC1) •Clearly state my thoughts, feelings, and ideas to others (EC2) •Settle disagreements in ways that are not hurtful (EC3)
4.	Accepting differences	To recognize and welcome factors that separate or distinguish one person from another.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Treat people who are different from me with respect (AD1) •Interact with people who are different from me (AD2)
5.	Leadership	To assist a group in meeting its goals by showing or directing along the way; using personal influence to guide a group in reaching its goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Organize a group to reach its goal (L1) •Use different leadership styles (L2) •Get others to share in leadership (L3)
6.	Self-responsibility	Taking care of oneself; being accountable for one's behaviour and obligations; choosing for oneself between right and wrong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Write/share what is right for myself when interacting with others in a group (SR1) •Admitting mistakes made in the earlier posts (SR2) •Understanding that it is important to follow through on commitments I have made (SR3) •Having control over my own personal goals/future (SR4)

Table 1: Selected Life Skills, * Definitions, * and Indicators

*Sandra J Bailey & Mary Y Deen (2002)



On 28th Feb. 2007, moderator of the group started a new topic:

Should safer sex information be available to 14 year old young girls? If yes, in what form? How to reach young girls of this age who do not go to schools?

<http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/hivaidseduindia/message/1>

S.No	Name of Pre service Teacher	Words	Outcome Indicators	Hyperlinks
1.	Pranita	124	DM1,CT1, EC1, SR1	http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/hivaidseduindia/message/2
2.	Sakina	208	DM1,CT3, EC2, SR1	http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/hivaidseduindia/message/4
3.	Shipra	59 36 16	CT4, EC2, SR1, EC3	http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/hivaidseduindia/message/10 http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/hivaidseduindia/message/11 http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/hivaidseduindia/message/12
4	Moderator	49	---	http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/hivaidseduindia/message/13
5.	Geetika	110	DM2,CT3, CT4, EC1, L3	http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/hivaidseduindia/message/5
6.	Santosh	121	EC2, L1, SR4	http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/hivaidseduindia/message/45?var=1&l=1
7.	Nisha Kurian	53	EC1	http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/hivaidseduindia/message/66?var=1&l=1
8.	Ganga	78	DM1,CT1, EC1,AD1	http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/hivaidseduindia/message/8

9.	Pramila Ahlawat	98	DM1,CT4, EC1, AD2, L1	http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/hivaidseduindia/message/71
10.	Asheema	75	DM1,CT1, AD1, EC1	http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/hivaidseduindia/message/9
11.	Sujata Kar	227	DM1,CT1, CT2, EC1, AD2, L1, SR1	http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/hivaidseduindia/message/88
12.	Saumya	128	CT3, EC1, L1, SR1	http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/hivaidseduindia/message/46
13.	Ashish	100	DM1,CT1, EC1, L1	http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/hivaidseduindia/message/123
14.	Pramila Ahlawat	151	CT3, CT4, EC1, L1, SR4	http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/hivaidseduindia/message/95
15.	Suchismita	197	DM1,CT1, EC2, AD1, L1, SR1	http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/hivaidseduindia/message/96
16.	Pooja	100	DM1,CT1, EC3, AD2, L1, SR4	http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/hivaidseduindia/message/128
17.	Moderator	280	---	http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/hivaidseduindia/message/113

Table 2: Posts of in service Teachers in response to Discussion Topic and Outcome Indicators

Indicators of Life Skills Based Education

Quantitative (in terms of outcome indicators) as well as qualitative analysis of the posts of in service teachers indicate gain in terms of life skills.

S.No.	LIFE SKILLS	OUTCOME INDICATORS
1.	Decision Making	DM1- 9, DM2 -1, DM3 - 0
2.	Critical Thinking	CT1 - 5, CT2 - 1, CT3 - 4, CT4 -4
3.	Effective Communication	EC1 - 10, EC2 - 4, EC3 - 2
4.	Accepting Differences	AD1 - 3, AD2 - 3
5.	Leadership	L1 - 8, L2 - 0, L3 -1
6.	Self-responsibility	SR1 - 5, SR2 - 0, SR3 - 0, SR4 - 3

Table 3: Indicators of Life Skills Based Education (Outcome Indicators)

The analysis of the above mentioned topic shows:

1. Sharing of ideas, generating input, generating information, and general democratic participation -- *indicators of idea generating* (Harasim, 1990).

2. Due to discussion of different issues, pre service teachers of the group become aware of the different options/alternatives available. These ideas further help members in choosing/deciding an alternative over others (Clarification and identification of different ideas, clustering into various positions (agreement/disagreement; questioning/elaboration) etc. This helps pre service teachers in *Decision making and sense of self-responsibility*.
3. Asynchronous online discussion group provides pre service teachers to consider other' opinions, perspectives, and arguments/fully reflect on their own ideas. Pre service teachers think more carefully about what they are going to say – and how they are going to say it – before posting. This helps them in *critical thinking*.
4. Linking of ideas help in developing a relationship between the members of the group. They share a common purpose, interest and commitment. They exchange written thoughts, information, or messages clearly and settle disagreements without hurting each other. They learn to *communicate effectively and accept differences*.
5. There are indications about structuring, understanding and consensus of ideas among the pre service teacher which results in Intellectual convergence. Pre service teachers develop 'we' feeling and become interdependent. All are active participants in the process of leadership i.e. *shared leadership*.

To Sum Up

Teaching is a very challenging profession. The role of teacher is continuously evolving in the information and knowledge society. Being a teacher in knowledge society requires new competencies, new skills and use of new pedagogies. Teachers need to be familiar with formal system as well as ODL environment especially after right to education act in India. In order to meet these challenges, teacher education institutions are also expected to prepare teachers for future challenges by not only apprising them of their new roles but also to provide such experiences which can minimise the gaps between what is preached/expected out of them and what is actually practiced in these institutions.

Online discussion group like hivaidseuindia@yahoogroups.com designed for pre service teachers in this study has not only helped pre service teachers and teacher educator to share initial perceptions which later transform into a learning engagement and the learning engagement results in knowledge creation, attitude change and skills transformation. In short, online discussion group can help pre service teachers to gain in terms of life skills in an ODL environment.

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