

TRAINING THE TRAINERS: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE NATIONAL OPEN SCHOOL IN INDIA

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Introduction

Growth in the use of distance learning has not been confined to the University sector; at almost every level of education someone, somewhere is making use of distance learning. This growth is common to developed and developing countries alike, partly due to increased pressures on educational provision at a time of acute economic constraint, and partly because distance education now has a track record which demonstrates that it can work (though its acceptability varies from country to country, as does its equality). Unfortunately, lack of understanding and realism about its potential, limitations and costs also lead to misperceptions about it. Distance educators need both theoretical understanding and practical competence. The changes in practice required are not just technical. Often they involve a radical shift in perceptions of teaching and learning as an activity, and in the values underpinning them. Individuals are also likely to need better skills in teamwork and communication, in integrating media or managing support services. At present, the reality is that many distance educators lack training of any kind and on the job experience is thought (mistakenly) to suffice.

So what kind of training and development is needed? How can it be provided? What has been the involvement and experience of National Open School (NOS) as a provider?

The Need For Training

In this paper, *'training'* has been used as a shorthand term for professional development. It refers to the development of understanding and acquisition of skills.

Especially in a developing country like India, the needs for training are considerable, given the financial constraints affecting programmes, the limited infrastructure, and scarcity of skilled human resource at local levels. NOS, too, is faced with a shortage of appropriate experienced staff. Many distance education staff come from conventional institutions and are uninformed about distance education practices in general and unprepared for the changes that will be demanded of the way they work.

Face-to face contact sessions provided by a tutor at a study centre seem to be the most viable and crucial student support in an open learning system. Since the learning skills are comparatively low among open school students compared to those in the open universities, open school students require longer exposure to direct teaching, greater attention, and more supervised self study. Special care is needed in personal contact programmes to ensure that tutorials, interactive group learning, and laboratory practicals take place, not lectures. Open school learners need support from human beings because they often run into all sorts of anxieties, problems and difficulties when trying to learn on their own. They want somebody who can help them with their learning and respond to them as an individual. This support needs to be planned at least as rigorously as the package materials.

Who Needs Training?

At the beginning the human resources are drawn from the conventional system who have some or no knowledge of open learning. Their previous experience as teacher or manager often proves to be counter-productive as they continue to act in the same way as in the conventional system, being authoritative and resistant to change. The study centres located in a conventional education campus use resources like classrooms, laboratories and man power locally available. It makes it easier for such institutes to run open education courses. The use of available infrastructure reduces investment requirement, ensuring greater utilization of the existing infrastructure. On other side of the picture, one finds disadvantages which need greater attention. Some important disadvantages are—

- To carry out the open education programmes co-ordinators, resource persons, technical staff and services of administrative staff are drawn from the institutes themselves. Unfortunately, local staff trained to work in conventional system continue with attitudes of the conventional type. Very often the tutor says: 'what am I supposed to do, if the package is doing the teaching', or the co-ordinator says: 'it does not fit the system' or 'it is difficult to control'.
- The staff working in such institutes seems apathetic in running open education programmes because majority of them do not believe in the philosophy of open education. They work either because of management pressure or for additional income.
- Since they are used to the conventional system of education, they give more emphasis on teaching courses whereas open education system is based on self learning process.

Within the multi- channel delivery mechanism developed by NOS, a major component is the Personal Contact classes conducted in the study centres during evenings, week-end and holidays. In open learning using distance education methodologies at the school level, the role of contact classes is far more important than the same at higher education levels. As such, the effectiveness of the contact classes depends much on the effectiveness of the teachers who conduct them. In the open learning system, the teachers (or tutors as they are often called) have a different role to play-they are essentially managers of the learning experiences. A creative system such as this needs a body of far sighted innovators who are able to intuitively understand the fundamentals, processes, and nuances of the system.

Training At NOS

As already mentioned, NOS provides student support through a network of over 1000 conventional schools, called Accredited Institutions (AI). At every AI, there is one co-ordinator, one assistant, and at least 20 subject experts, called Tutors. Thus, there are a minimum of 22 people to be trained at each AI. This takes the figure upto approximately 25000 personnel to be trained. Since training for the open learning system is an ongoing process, the sheer numbers involved make it physically impossible to train these many people individually. Also, space for so many trainees cannot be created and optimally used. Expensive training equipment and office space cannot be maintained and so many trainees cannot be collected at the desired time for a specialised training. It has become the need of the day that the training be trainee centered and they be provided training at their time, place and areas of work.

It is because of these reasons that the conventional cascade model of training is adopted at NOS. In this model the training inputs flow down from the group of core trainers to the tutors through a layer of trained co-ordinators. The co-ordinators are exposed to intensive, direct training and are expected to go back to their respective schools and in turn, train the tutors there. The cascade model of training as used at NOS is illustrated below.

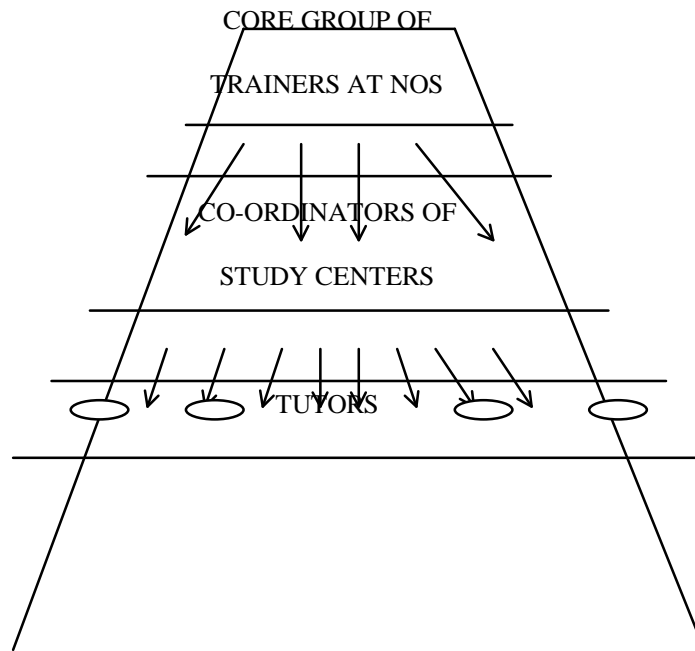


Figure 1 : Cascade Model Of Training:

In allowing the percolation of training to the grassroots level, NOS is prepared for some transmission loss and compensates for it by having more frequent training sessions than would ordinarily be employed or needed.

Training Methodology

Professional development is offered in a variety of ways:

- short term orientation courses;
- training through the teleconference mode.
- guides and manuals;

- Short term orientation courses are organised for the co-ordinators on a regional basis. The country has been divided into five regions for the sake of convenience and co-ordinators from various AI's are selected for these courses. Care is taken to see that all the co-ordinators in the region get adequate amount of training.

- One - way video and two- way audio conferencing using a communication satellite is being used to provide training courses for the co-ordinators in an attempt not to disturb them from their workplace for a prolonged period of time. In keeping with the tradition of utilising existing resources, NOS uses the studio of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) as the training end and the trainees are located at the regional centers of IGNOU. Long distance telephone lines and fax are used by the recipients for communication with the studio.

- A self learning module for developing interactive teaching skills of the tutors has been developed by the HRD unit at NOS. A training session had been organised for directly training the tutors in the use of this module. Despite the resounding success of the programme it had to be discontinued because of inadequate staffing of the HRD unit. Currently the self learning module is being made available to the tutors.

- It is being proposed to develop interactive video programmes to overcome the problem of lack of trained HRD personnel at NOS as also to counteract the difficulty of using the self learning module by the tutors at the AI's.

Conclusion

In any organisation, investment in human resource development has an asset value in terms of both its current performance and its potential performance. In a developing country like ours, the need of the day is to make convenient and cost effective education available to a very large number of learners. In this scenario, open schooling emerges as the most viable alternative. NOS is faced with the task of adequately training a large force of front-line workers for the programme to succeed. In order to achieve this goal, NOS is making the best possible use of the resources and infrastructure available. These efforts may seem outdated by many and a case could be argued for the use of better and more advanced technology.