

**BUILDING LEARNING COMMUNITIES FOR OUR MILLENNIUM  
REACHING WIDER AUDIENCES THROUGH INNOVATIVE  
APPROACHES: A CASE OF YASHWANTRAO CHAVAN MAHARASHTRA  
OPEN UNIVERSITY**

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## ABSTRACT

Developments in information communication technology (ICT) have spawned a number of innovations in virtual education or ODL. Creating discussion forums in the regional language was an innovative idea that was used. The paper shares the various experiments that were tried, strategies we adopted, the results of these innovations tried and the lessons learnt.

The Information and Communication Technologies will have a substantial effect on what we do in schools just as the advent of the pen and paper did in the past.

- Seymour Papert

### **Introduction**

We live in turbulent times. The forces of globalisation are not only affecting but are also transforming finance, currency, trade, employment and communication (Dighe, A., 2001, p. 269). The expression 'Global Village' is no longer a contradiction in terms. It is a reality; thanks to the emerging Information Communication Technology (ICT). (Kareem, S.A. 1999) The sphere of education has also been influenced by the twin phenomena of globalization and liberalization. The rapid technological changes affect many aspects of our lives, including the way we learn. The school of tomorrow will embed learning in technology rich educational environments. (Vernal, R. 1998) This will be natural for the new generation of children for whom ICT is already part of their everyday life. (Nikolova, I. 2001) Today's school age generation knows more about technology than do their teachers. The new generation is growing up with the technology, which they use to communicate, collaborate and shop online. (Natarajan, R. 2002)

Globalization has brought the world closer and has evolved the need of maximum reach out, whereas knowledge era has played an instrumental role in creating the knowledge society. Communities and societies are complex, organic entities. They are ever evolving (Lee, S, 2003). The 'knowledge' society very much necessitates easy access to and sharing of knowledge. In a way it is a process of building the learning communities. The citizens of the learning community of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be required to possess the skills such as – learning how to learn, how to make the critical judgments, how to tell the difference between the good, bad and indifferent, how to communicate intelligently, to be flexible, adaptable and tolerant to other creeds and cultures and to make the contribution to their city and to the well-being of others (Longworth, 2003). It is the learning communities that have the potential to recapture our lost ideals, it is the learning communities that have the potential to bring forth our best human virtues, it is the learning communities that can unite us in a sense of respectful synergistic communion and it is the learning communities that offer us the greatest vehicle for the manifestation of an ideal place to live to work and to be (Ralph, D. as quoted by Longworth, 2003). This also emphasizes the need of promoting reach out to the grass root level and in the light of globalization it is not mere reach out, but 'global' reach out. Some of the hurdles in the global reach out are

language barriers, socio-cultural barriers, learning atmosphere (motivation to learn). In the learning society the need-based skills and content are of crucial importance. In this knowledge era, when there is knowledge explosion, everyday there is some new knowledge being generated. One's socio-cultural background is very important in the success to acquire and to assimilate this new knowledge. Only on the sound basis the assimilation of the new knowledge takes place. Education being the instrument of social change (though blunt), the society expects the system of education to take the lead in this regard.

### **Role of Education and thereby Teacher Education**

In this age of globalization, change is so rapid that the educational system has to keep itself abreast with the latest developments. On this background the whole notion of the teacher as disseminator of knowledge is now turned on its head. The teacher is no longer the sage on the stage but the guide on the side. The role of the teacher evolves into navigating learning in technology which educational environments and into designing learning environments that allow more flexible learning, mediated by technology. (Nikolova, I. 2001) If education is responsive to the spirit of the time and the needs of society and its future aspirations, then teacher education should articulate effectively the concerns and commitments of education as a social construction endeavor. (UGC 2001) The learning society demands the education that is fast, flexible and need-based. The challenge for the educationists is to think globally, have regional references and to act locally. Their area of work, reach out has gone so wide with tremendous increase in the number of students and courses on offer. This is where the conventional universities had to give up their conventional modes of delivering the educational programmes. At this juncture the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) comes into the scene.

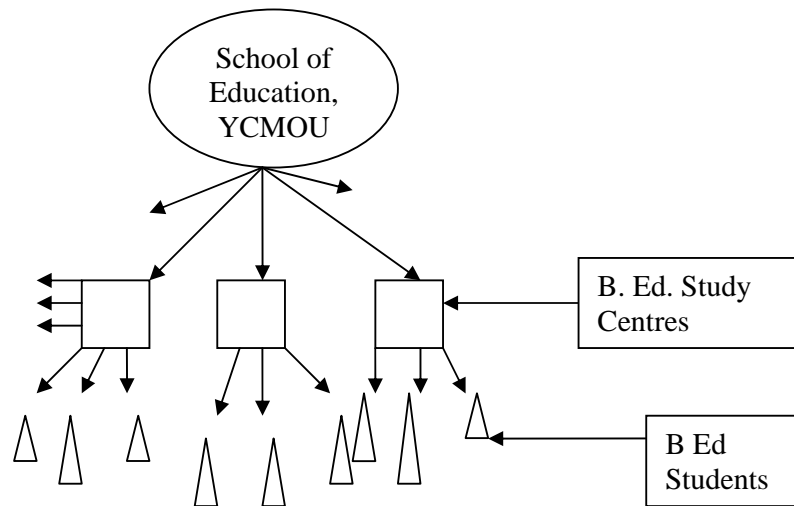
### **Open and Distance Learning: A Globalised way of Education**

We have today many target groups who need education and training of certain prescription but are not served by the established system. The two characteristics of the emerging demands are - they evolve large numbers and they need a system that will suit the convenience and meet the needs of the learners. In order to handle the numbers and also to improve accessibility, especially for continuing and lifelong education, we have to satisfy two requirements - higher production in the system and greater flexibility in the structure. It is in this context that the distance education emerged on the horizon. It is a new mode in its own right and meets new demands and caters to new target groups. (Swamy, 2002. p. 4) ODL has crucial significance in addressing critical educational challenges posed due to globalisation, such as access, equity, cost, reaching disadvantaged groups and communities, need for lifelong learning and relevance (Khan, A., 2000, p 462). The qualities of ODL are comparable to those of industry: quality, customer satisfaction and quick response to changing needs, in short, competitiveness (Swamy, V., 2002, p 12). These qualities of ODL are obvious and undisputed. ODL provides an opportunity to promote equality by taking knowledge to the learner instead of insisting on the learner to come to the place of knowledge. ODL is one of the most important and widely proliferating educational phenomena worldwide. Universal education, lifelong education, continuous updating and innovation are needed for survival in the present age (Khan, A., 2000, p 462). Distance education meets many of the challenges and in addition to this provides the developing countries an opportunity to move faster and narrow the divide. Rapid developments in technology, involving the convergence of

telecommunication, computers and micro-electronics and the emergence of the Internet have revolutionised both the speed and nature of communications. These new ICTs have made a major impact on education, particularly distance education. (Shrivastava & Reddy, 2002, p. 43)

**Teacher Education through Open and Distance Learning (ODL): A Case of Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU)**

Today ODL has established its credibility in the Society to an extent that it offers the professional degree programme as well through distance education. Teacher Education programmes are no exceptions to this. Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU) is a State Open University in the State of Maharashtra in India, which is the first Open University in the Country to offer professional degree programmes in teacher education through the School of Education. YCMOU operates mainly through the network of study centers in various districts of the State of Maharashtra. We are the School of Education (SoE) of this State Open University (SOU). We mainly run B. Ed. and M. Ed. programmes. Our study centers (SCs) are the Colleges of Education. Our students are in-service school and junior college teachers from all over the State. In-service school and junior college teachers from a particular geographical area are enrolled to the study center located in that district. The following figure shows the structural relationship of SoE, its SCs and the end users (i. e. B. Ed. Students). As shown in figure 1, in this system SoE is the headquarter, the Colleges of Education are the SCs and the in-service school and junior college teachers are the end-users/ learners. At study centers students through contact sessions have a face-to-face contact with the counselors who are teacher educators. We as head quarter have a face-to-face contact with the counselors working at the different SCs, but, there is no direct contact between the headquarter and the students.



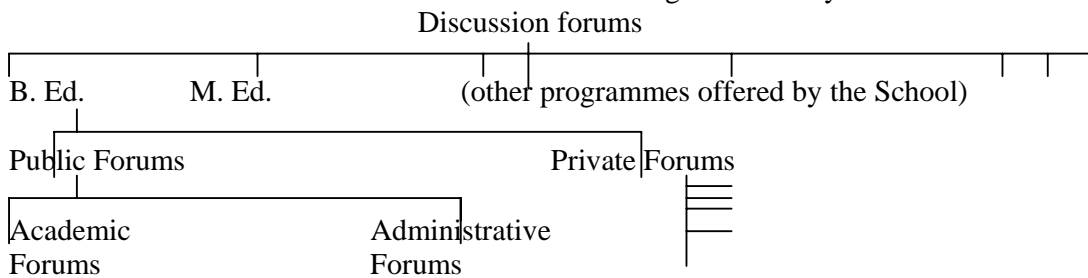
**Fig. I: Diagrammatic Representation of the contact between the School of Education, B. Ed. Study Centres and the B. Ed. Students (end-users)**

The application of ICT and software tools is often claimed to improve the efficiency of education, its reach and its quality, and hence to have the potential to redress existing educational inequalities borne by underserved marginal groups (World Bank

1995: 84) (as quoted by Yates, C.; 2000; p.241). We do realise that Internet provides a vast scope for coverage at the national level and beyond the shores. Hence, the School of Education decided to develop its own website and begin with some activities on the website, one of which is the dissemination of admission lists through the discussion forums.

### The Blue Print of the Discussion Forum Tree of School of Education

The primary criterion for the classification of the forums is the programme. Under each programme there are mainly two categories – private and public. The private group of forums, which has limited access, is used for the correspondence with the study centers, whereas the category of public forums is used for the communications with the students and would-be-students. The public group of forums is once again divided into two categories – academic, which is used for online counseling and administrative – which is used for the administrative purposes. The structure of the discussion forum tree on the website can be shown diagrammatically as follows.



**Fig. 2: Hierarchy of the Blue Print of the Tree of Discussion Forums**

In the context of the language and socio-cultural barriers the learners are comfortable working in the regional language – Marathi – rather than English. Hence, as a policy decision the official language of the University for wider reach out is Marathi. Hence, even the language for the website of the School has been chosen as Marathi ([www.ycmou.com/edn](http://www.ycmou.com/edn)). The target group is not at all competent enough to use the web-based instructions. Taking into account this cultural background, the specific strategies have been adopted for instructing the readers about surfing on the site. E.g., instead of hyper linking the statement “admission lists” we are required to hyperlink the statement “click here to see the admission lists”. Otherwise we keep getting ‘n’ number of phone calls from the would-be-students asking ‘what to do further after reaching the statement showing hyper linking to the statement “admission lists”’. Use of discussion forums is not an innovation, but the innovative idea of having the forums in the regional language, Marathi, was used. Though there were lots of technical difficulties and complications (such as Unicode compatibility, availability of the quality Marathi software, ability of the people to be able to use this software, and so on), the biggest advantage was the maximum reach out at the grass root level and the participation from the remotest village. Even the study centers counselors are not ICT-comfortable. Hence, the School keeps giving the ICT inputs to them as well. Later the tested material is used for the learners after the appropriate modifications. In order to know whether the learners are actually able to benefit out of the innovation that was tried by the School a research project was conducted – Study of the problems faced by the distance learners in using the web-based facilities. The administrative forums were chosen for the study, as the usage of academic forums is optional for them. They access these forums only if they are interested. But, in case of the

administrative forums, it was must for them to access the forums as the crucial information regarding programme is displayed on the forums. The B. Ed. Degree is important for them in order to get the promotion in the job, hence, the administrative information is very important for them for their bread and butter. They have more intrinsic motivation to participate in the administrative forums.

### **Research Methodology**

The objective of the present study was to list down the problems faced by the students and to decide on the further ICT strategies of the School in the light of the same. The data was gathered by the simple random sapling method from the would-be-students when they came to the University for their admission interview. In all 1090 questionnaires got filled in. The data was analysed and the following results were obtained.

### **Results**

The following results were obtained after the data analysis.

1. How many candidates were able to reach the discussion forum to see the required information? 66% candidates were successful in reaching the concerned forum in order to obtain the required information.
2. How many candidates were successful in getting information from the website on the basis of the available instructions and skills? 64 % candidates were successful in procuring information.
3. How many cases got the information regarding the admission 'only' through the discussion forum and did not get letter by post? There were 34 cases, that means 5% of the successful candidates got the information only through the forum.
4. From where did they access the Internet?
  - a. Own house – 3 %
  - b. Someone else's house – 4 %
  - c. School/ College – 6 %
  - d. Cyber Café – 60 %
  - e. Other offices – 25 %
5. How much time did they need to get the required information?
  - a. 15 minutes – 9 %
  - b. 30 minutes – 37 %
  - c. 1 hour – 36 %
  - d. more than an hour – 11 %
6. How much expenses were required?
  - a. Rs. 10/- - 31 %
  - b. Rs. 20/- -34 %
  - c. Rs. 30/- - 15 %
  - d. Rs. 40/- - 6 %
  - e. More than Rs. 40/- -11 %
7. Problems faced in accessing the Internet facility -
  - a. Unavailability of internet facility in the vicinity – 30 %
  - b. The Internet facility was not affordable – 9 %
  - c. There was electricity problem – 9 %
8. Problems faced in procuring required information -
  - a. Did not know URL accurately – 79 %

- b. The path to reach the forum from the home page was complicated - 59 %
9. Problems which they are going to face in future in usage of ICT by the School for various purposes
- a. I don't know how online counseling, VCM are going to be exactly beneficial to me – 13 %
  - b. Cannot use Internet –19 %
  - c. Cannot spare money for taking separate training to get benefited from the above facilities – 6 %
  - d. Have computer-phobia –3 %
  - e. Internet facility cannot be easily accessible to me – 16 %
  - f. Facility is unaffordable – 13 %

### **Discussions**

The present study has a special importance from the establishment of the ICT culture amongst our target group point of view. This was for the third time that we were uploading the lists of the candidates eligible for the interview. Three years ago when we had experimented the method for the first time, we had to keep telling the candidates to visit the website and check for themselves. Now during the third year the experience was that the candidates were already visiting the website even before the lists were uploaded. This is certainly an achievement, though small, in taking them a step ahead towards becoming efficient members of the knowledge society.

1. 66% candidates were able to reach the forum of which 64 % were successful in actually obtaining the required information. This reflects on the methodology of giving the instructions regarding hyper-linking and the usage of the regional language, Marathi. The reason for the success was the strategies that were adopted by keeping the language and the socio-cultural background in view while using an innovative technique.
2. The School gradually plans to shift to the totally online admission, wherein there will be no postal correspondence. From this point of view the confidence that the candidates do visit the website and arrive for the interview though there is no postal communication with them is crucial. Hence the figure of 5% of candidates arriving for the interview is important. This is a sort of benchmarking for the further plans.
3. Regarding the locations of the access of Internet facilities two striking figures can be seen – the least number of candidates (3%) accessed Internet from their own houses and the maximum number of candidates (60%) access Internet from the cyber cafes. This means that School still cannot plan on the strategy wherein the modality is on the assumption that the learner will have access to Internet from his own house. But, the School can certainly bank on the cyber cafes. With the changing time the density of cyber-cafes is increasing day by day and this can be used to the benefit of the School apart from the computer facilities provided to the study centers.
4. The highest number of students (36- 37%) was required to spend about 30 minutes to an hour to obtain the required information. This throws light on two aspects – the complexity of the path to the forum could be reduced, the instructions could be more clear-cut and the technicality of the forum especially in the regional language is to be set in such a way that the downloading takes minimum time.
5. The most of the candidates needed the expenses of about Rs. 10/- to Rs. 20/-, which is a good indication of the technology becoming cheaper and therefore

- affordable to the people at the grass root level. The cost will be required to be reduces further more if they have t use it for the online counseling, etc.
6. Unavailability of Internet facility in the vicinity seems to be the most common problem faced in accessing the Internet facility 30% candidates giving this reason. 79% of the candidates faced problem in procuring required information, as they did not know the URL accurately. This gives direction in the required inputs by the School in developing the ICT culture further.
  7. In response to the enquiry regarding the problems which they are going to face in future in usage of ICT by the School for various purposes, the various responses that were obtained were - I don't know how online counseling, VCM are going to be exactly beneficial to me, cannot use Internet, cannot spare money for taking separate training to get benefited from the above facilities, have computer-phobia, Internet facility cannot be easily accessible to me and facility is unaffordable to me.

### **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that innovative ways and means are to be used for building learning communities, but the innovation has to be in the view of and by taking limitations and practical difficulties of the target group into consideration. Secondly the inputs and the infrastructural framework have to be developed by the parent institution and efforts are to be made from the increasing competencies of the target group point of view. From the present study we got the insight that the School of Education will have to go bit slowly in adopting the web-based strategies. The inputs from the School to the learners will be must and the ICT culture will have to be further developed.

When one speaks of the learning society, such testing will have to be done frequently and such mini and action researches will have to be taken up in order to take the decisions on the basis of sound rationale and feedback. Each innovation is going to bring a number of challenges for us, but making the system user-friendly and keen monitoring and research in this regard are certainly going to help.

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