TEACHING SKILLS FOR DISTANCE EDUCATORS

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Abstract

The expansion of educational development has tremendously taken place in the last few decades. The number of schools, colleges, and universities has risen with the addition of privately owned schools and colleges. Traditional educational organizations are concentrating on modern methods of imparting education. Eventually, the traditional mode of imparting education has transformed into a distance mode of education. The teaching skills required for the traditional mode of teaching–learning practices have now been replaced by newer teaching skills. In the traditional mode of the teaching–learning process the teaching skills are called 'Micro – teaching Skills'. These are put into practice as the student – teacher masters over the content related to education. The teaching skills are crucial as they give an idea of how a human being learns. These skills do not reveal the expertise of teaching a particular subject or domain but give a general idea of how to teach the candidates effectively. Hence they are common to all areas where training is imparted. To cater to the demands of education from the ever growing population the traditional mode of imparting education is not enough. Hence Distance Education mode came into existence. Such a mode of education is student centric as it caters to the needs of the students on priority basis. Distance Education evolved to serve those who cannot attend regular college hours at fixed place and a time. They are mostly working adults with an aspiration to acquire higher education. They cannot educate themselves as conventional students at a conventional campus. Distance Education becomes comfortable to the courses imparted through the traditional mode. In the traditional mode Micro – teaching skills start with set induction skill, to explanation skill, questioning skill, preparation of audio – visual aids skill and class control skills. These skills are to be revised for the distance educators.

Key words – Distance education, Adult education, teaching skills.

Introduction to Distance Education

Distance Education is a mode of education where there is geographical distance or space between the learners and the facilitators. It focuses on adult education; the adult

learners are the ones who have lost their first chance of education, hence also called as second chance learners. It only through Distance Education a large mass of adult learners could be tapped. The adult learners are made comfortable with the facilities given by Distance Education, which are benefits from studying from home or work place and no restrictions of attending the classes at a particular place.

Distance education had become one of the major educational strategies. Distance learning has a remarkable development during the last few years, sometimes much rapidly than expected. The digital era has contributed to the remarkable growth of Distance Education. The usage of technologies has broken traditional and geographical barriers. The benefits of digital era have highlighted the differences between the Distance Education and traditional educational system. The development of Distance Education had increased substantially as well due to reduction in the costs of the telecommunications and information technology. Due to this the costs involved by the Distance Education system per student are relatively lower than those from the traditional mode of teaching learning methods. The digital era has an indirect proportion between the two factors, cost of infrastructure, maintenance and number of students of Distance Education. The cost of infrastructure, maintenance decreases but the number of adult learners goes on increasing!

Importance of the Evaluation Process

The evaluation process is the most important process to check whether "learning" has occurred or not. The evaluation phrase will also reveal whether the aims and objectives of the learning process were fulfilled or not. The teaching – learning process is tri – polar, ongoing process. As the triangle depicts that the aims and objectives of the teaching – learning process will come into picture with the apt "teaching methods". If the teaching methods are apt then the aims and objectives of the teaching – learning process will be fulfilled. In the evaluation, assessment is done to check whether the teaching methods were correct and whether the aims were achieved.

Efficient self-learning takes place naturally when we teach others. While we teach others self-learning is emancipated. Maximum learning takes place when the concept is discussed or taught to peers. Hence it is aptly said that "To teach is to learn twice". Children tend to learn more from their friends rather than from the teachers.

Experience also teaches us a lot. Experience teaches slowly and at the cost of mistakes. As rightly preached by Franklin P. Jones "Experience is that marvelous thing that enables you to recognize a mistake when you make it again". A careful and nurturing parent

or a teacher will always try and protect the child, by not allowing the child to do certain things in his or her own. They tend to over protect the children by not allowing them to do the activities there by not lending them an opportunity of getting the feel of the experience. But the greatest teacher is the one who under careful observation gives an opportunity to do things on their own. The teacher no longer is a teacher but a facilitator who believes in giving the experience. As it is always said "Experience is the best teacher". Exposing the child to the real life situations will allow a child to get the sense of the incident, there by lending an opportunity to the child to learn more effectively.

Schools and colleges tend to teach the students to sit in one place for hours together in a much disciplined manner and expect the student to listen what the teacher says. Sometimes for the observance of discipline the students are not allowed to speak with each other. Hence there is no conversation between the students. But in fact the real learning takes place through "conversation". The exchange of ideas is always through tête-à-tête. The children hardly get any opportunity to express themselves and there is where the learning process is ceased.

Effective learning also takes place when we see and hear precisely. Hence parents and teacher should use the words efficiently as the students are minute observers and tend to imitate the actions of their elders speedily. With this good reading material should be given for liberating the creative thoughts of the children.

Lastly learning takes place while the teacher delivers the lectures. It is said that the learning takes place when the teacher preaches or teaches something, but this is considered to be at the apex of the triangle, and has got very much less to do in connections with the learning process. Hence the oldest method of teaching – Delivering lectures, has got a less impact on the student's minds.

The triangle here depicts how effective learning takes place. On apex of the triangle is the "Lecture" way to teaching, while the base of the triangle shows the method of teaching others. The base ensures that the teaching – learning process will be more effectives as compared with the others. So let us be the teachers who give an opportunity to the students to experiences the realities of life. As "Experience is a hard teacher because experience gives the test first, the lesson afterwards".

Introduction to teaching skills

Teaching is a complex skill made up of many micro or specific skills. Some of the definitions of teaching are as follows

"Teaching means many different things, that teaching act varies from person to person and from situation to situation." (Bar, 1961)

"The behavior or activities of persons as they go about doing whatever is required of teachers, particularly those activities which are concerned with the guidance or direction of learning of others." (Ryan, 1965)

"Teaching is the arrangement of contingencies of reinforcement under which students learn. They learn without teaching in their natural environment, but teachers arrange special contingencies which expedite learning and hastening the appearance of behavior which would otherwise be acquired slowly or making scene of the appearance of behavior which might otherwise never occur." (B.F. Skinner. 1968)

"Teaching as an act of interpersonal influence aimed at changing the ways in which other persons can or will behave." (N.L. Gage, 1963)

Teaching skills can be defined as 'a behavior of the teacher which facilitates pupils' learning directly or indirectly.

It includes all art of the teaching which maximizes pupils' learning.

A teaching skill is that art of the teacher which makes communication between the teacher and pupils sufficiently.

B.K. Passi has given the following list of Teaching Skills in his book "Becoming Better Teacher; Micro-teaching Approach":

1. Writing instructional objectives

2. Introducing a lesson

3. Fluency in questioning

4. Probing questioning

5. Explaining

6. Illustrating with examples

7. Stimulus variation

8. Silence and non-verbal cues

9. Reinforcement

10. Increasing pupil participation

11. Using black board

12. Achieving Closure

13. Recognizing attending behavior

The above teaching skills are important for teachers teaching in the traditional face to face teaching mode. These teaching skills are required in an integrated manner to achieve the objectives of learning. But the question arises as which are these specific teaching skills are of importance for distance educators? Will these skills enhance the distance teaching – learning process? This research study focuses on the teaching skills required for distance educators.

Significance of the study

The study is significant to the field of education in that it builds upon the available body of knowledge about Micro teaching skills for distance learners. The present study will have significance to the teaching community especially the distance educators. Generally distance educators are experts in their domains but they lack in the teaching process of the concepts. The success of present research will develop confidence among distance mode teachers for using the various skills for teaching. Further training programs can be conducted on teaching skills for distance learners for in-service and pre service teachers. The teacher educator would be able to equip the next generation with certain teaching skills required to teach in the distance mode. The study has the implications to curriculum designers to include those strategies in the curriculum of pre-service teacher education programs at various levels.

Distance Education takes place primarily through the writing skills for the preparation of quality Self Learning Materials, skill of quality delivery of the lectures through Internet, interactive chat sessions with the distance learners etc. Hence the teaching skills will modify to those of the traditional teaching skills. These skills are discussed in the following table.

Sr. No	Teaching skills	Component teaching skills
1	Writing skills for the preparation of quality Self Learning Materials	a) Writing instructional objectives b) Selecting and writing the content c) Organizing the content
2	Skill of quality delivery of the lectures through Internet	a) Ease of handling the Internet) Demonstration of the content through presentation software Ability of explaining the topics with the Power points slides
3	Presentation skills	a) Use of computer application software b) Explanation skills c) Illustrating with examples
4	Managerial skills	a) Promoting pupils participation b) Management of the Virtual Class
5	Closure skills	a) Planned repetition b) Participation of the learners c) Getting feedback from the students

Table 1: Teaching skills and its component associated with Distance Education

Brief descriptions of these skills are as follows –

1 Writing skills for the preparation of quality Self Learning Materials

a) Writing instructional objectives

The instructional objectives should be described in the beginning. It gives a clear idea to the distance learner about what he / she is going to achieve at the end of the learning content. The objectives give a picture of what the students will be achieving after training intervention. It leads to proper teaching – learning processes. The evaluation process should be followed after the teaching – learning process. The evaluation process will lead to a conclusion of whether the objectives are achieved or not. It keeps a check on teachings of the facilitator and the learnings made by the students. Hence objectives should be written at the start which gives a clearer idea of the training intervention program.

b) Selecting and writing the content

The learning content should be so organized that the objectives are achieved. Easy and simple language should be used and the information presented should be self-sufficient as it should not force the learner to go hunting for additional sources or even a teacher. The learning content can be in the form of textbooks, reference materials and quick guides and or in pictorial forms like graphs, images. Digital learning material e – learnings, internet services like virtual communities, blogs, forums available as learning content. The content can be in any form – print or digital / soft, must be in lucid language. As there is geographical distance between the learner and the taught, the learning material acts as a motivating teacher instructing the distance learner to grasp in the contents. In traditional mode of learning the learners are in the purview of the teacher, who guides the learners in difficulty. But when it comes to distance learners the learning content itself becomes a teacher, rather a facilitator guiding distance learners to comprehend the various concepts.

c) Organizing the content

The content should provide all the possible academic support by way of explanations, illustrations. The content should be logically arranged to reduce learning volume and the need for external support. Content can be organized in a linear form or in branched form. The content is a big chuck of information which a novel learner cannot learn at one single go. Therefore it is fragmented in smaller chunks of information which are interrelated with each other. In the linear way, one piece of information is related to the next one. The next level can be an advanced level of information, an illustration or an explanation. One can go either forward or backward with the linear organization of information. The next type of

programming instruction is branched programming instructions and American psychologist Norman Crowder is given much of the credit for formulating this learning instruction. As the word "branching" means the subdivision the stem or trunk. The same concept is applied in the branched programming instruction style. The main concept (the trunk of the tree) is sub divided into smaller concepts (the stems of the tree) and further again to other minute details of the topic. The basic difference between the linear programming instructions and branched programming instructions is that the learner can take his own decisions and become accustomed his own learning styles which suit his pace of learning. When learning takes place errors are obviously made. These errors do not hinder the learning process but due to the errors one finds a way to the correct answers. Eliminating the errors lead to the accurate answers. In branched programming instructions if an error occurs, it is detected. The detected error is then further rectified for the correct response. This may also be done by going to the earlier subject matter already learnt. When the wrong response is corrected then the person goes to the next concept to be learnt.

2   Skill of quality delivery of the lectures through Internet

a)   Ease of handling the Internet

The advent of computer technology has influenced distance learning. The use of Internet has improved the teaching – learning process and hence handling Internet and its services becomes one of the crucial skills for a distance educator.

b)   Demonstration of the content through presentation software

Unlike the conventional / traditional classes, the distance education lectures are conducted with the help of the digital equipment like computer or mobile phones. Hence distance educator should be well conversant with presentation soft wares. The content should be well organized and presented with facilities like sound, movement, colors and multimedia effects.

c)   Ability of explaining the topics with the help of presentation software

Presentation of the content is focused on the slides. Each slide contains information which is presented to the learners. Slides should not be full of textual material but pictures, images, tables should be incorporated. Focusing just the textual matter brings in monotony, but if pictures are added relevant to the content brings in excitement and pleasure in the learning process. The paragraphs should be instructionally designed so that it becomes easier for the distance learners to grasp the subject matter.

3   Presentation skills

a)   Use of computer application software

The distance educator should be able to use the computer application software aptly in the educational scenario.

b)   Explanation skills

In distance learning, there is a physical separation between the learner and facilitator. Hence the description of topic should be to the point. The explanation should motivate distance learner to study and acquire more and more knowledge.

 d)   Illustrating with examples

Educators must have observed that some abstract ideas or concepts are very difficult to teach so is the case of distance educators. In spite of their best efforts of explaining the concepts, the distance educators are unable to convey the true sense and meaning of the concepts. This difficulty of the teacher can be solved easily if they are able to master the skill of illustrating with examples.

4   Managerial skills

a)   Promoting pupils participation

Participative and interactive learning happens when educators teach in face to face mode. But it becomes a difficult task when it comes to distance education. As the word itself says, distance learners, i.e. learners separated with space. Hence to allow more participation the distance educators should promote more and more interactive learning. This can be done by instructionally designing learning material which includes self-assessment questions, adding in the "Activity questions" etc. During the internet conferencing classes the distance educators can ask questions which motivate distance learners to acquire more knowledge.

b)   Management of the Virtual Class

Virtual Classes are similar to video conferencing. The distance educators should be able to conduct such conferencing with ease.

5   Closure skills

a)   Planned repetition

While closing a video conference lecture or a unit in the self-learning material, reiteration of important points should be done. This concentrates attention of the distance learner on the important points.

b)   Participation of the learners

Learner's participation and feedback is necessary for making the teaching – learning process complete. Classroom participation can be in form of discussion of open ended questions.

Unusual and uncommon questions should be held on utmost priority in the discussions. Learner's participation ensures involvement in learning process.

c)   Getting feedback from the students

Feedback is an essential part of effective learning. It helps students understand the subject being studied and gives them clear guidance on how to improve their learning. Further it also gives a clear insight to the educators about their teaching methodology. Feedback depicts on whether the learning objectives are achieved or not. If a positive feedback, learners understood the concept, then the learning objectives were achieved. If the feedback not procured well then teaching process was not of standard, which in turn gives

Distance educators should always be interested in upgrading their teaching methodologies and this can only be done by getting constructive feedbacks from the students.

Objective of the study

• To relate the importance of teaching skills to distance educators.

Research methodology

Research is a systematic attempt to obtain answers to meaningful questions about phenomena or events through the application of scientific procedures. Research is considered to be the more formal, systematic and intensive process of carrying on a scientific method of analysis. It is directed towards discovery and development of an organized body of knowledge.

(Best, J and Kahn W, Research in Education, VII th ed, pg21).

According to oxford dictionary, research can be defined as „the systematic investigation into and study of material and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions. "Educational research refers to a systematic attempt to gain better understanding of educational processes generally with a view of improving its efficiency. It is an application of scientific method to the study of educational problems."- Research is thus a systematic and scientific approach to solve a problem. Therefore it is necessary to plan the activities in a systematic manner in advance.

The following paper follows the Descriptive Approach of Conclusive research. It relies on the empirical observations done during the study. It analyses the advantages of teaching skills in Distance Education mode.

Hypothesis

Declarative Hypothesis:

Distance educators consider that the teaching skills are necessary for effective teaching.

Null Hypothesis:

There is no significant effect on usage of teaching skills to distance educators.

The procedure

A group of 45 distance educators were selected for the study. These educators are teaching courses like Management, Computers, Education and Law through Distance learning mode. A questionnaire was developed and distance educators were given to complete it.

Analysis

The data procured from the questionnaire given to the distance educators was analyzed. The figures acquired through the questionnaire indicated that the null hypothesis was rejected with the acceptance of declarative hypothesis, which is as follows – "Distance educators consider that teaching skills are necessary for effective teaching".

Conclusion

The number of higher education institutions around the world offering Distance Education courses has increased considerably. The literature reviewing Distance Education methods, Distance Education technologies is available in a large numbers. It is only through the usage of technology the Distance Education has reached to the remotest part of the globe, leaving behind the national boundaries. One can say that the concepts like self-paced learning, learning anytime and anywhere is into practice which is only and only through the usage of technology in Distance Education. Many of the face- to- face learning institutions or Universities have now initiated with Distance Education courses or programs.

The institutions that offer Distance Education courses or programs are compelled to determine their quality. The implementations of Distance Education courses are many with the usage of technology. It is assumed that all the distance education courses are implemented with the usage of information and communication technology. It is commonly seen now a days that most of the professors engage their teachings through e – mails or internet based study materials when outside the classrooms. Students who attend the courses outside the classrooms often receive CDs for at least on their text materials.

The Distance Education programs can be implemented through various modes but the success of these programs is not confirmed. There are many factors which determine the success of the implementations of the Distance Education programs. These factors determine the creation of a comprehensive evaluation plan for the Distance Education programs. The distance educator is an expert in his or her domain, but lack in content delivery. The content,

of which ever domain, should be interactively presented in front of the distance learners. Skills required for teaching at a distance which are of great importance which lead to interactivity and further towards the success of the distance education program. The present study investigates about the skills required for distance educators. Through the analysis it is found out that skills are required for successful delivery of the distance education programs.

Distance learning has provided an outstanding platform to students for learning at their own convenience and at their own pace. To effectively implement the learning content in distance mode the distance educators have to be equipped with skills. In this rapidly changing system of learning, if you are working and need a good degree as well as specialized knowledge to enhance your teaching career then implementing distance teaching skills can be your cup of tea!

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Questionnaire used for knowing the opinions of distance educators

The knowledge of Internet is necessary for distance educators.	Yes	No
Distance educators should have the primary knowledge of creating slides on Power point software.	Yes	No
Communication skills of Distance educators have little or no importance	Yes	No
Distance educators should be able to illustrate the concepts with examples.	Yes	No
Recapitulation of the topic taught is necessary for concepts taught through Distance Education.	Yes	No

Please put an appropriate tick mark against the statements.

Your opinion will be strictly kept confidential.