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MDE-413: Learner Support Systems and Services

(New Course in place of ES-313: Learner Support Services)

EXPERT COMMITTEE

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Ms. Mythili G.

Mr. Tata Ramakrishna

Dr. Rose Nembiakkim (Now with SOSW, IGNOU)

Dr. Satya Sundar Sethy (Now with IIT, Chennai)

COURSE TEAM

Course Contributors

Dr. Sanjaya Mishra (Unit 1)
Dr. Satya Sundar Sethy
(Units 2, 3 & 4)

Language Editor

Dr. Abhilash Nayak
Regional Director
RC, Koraput
IGNOU

Unit Design & Format Editor

Mr. Tata Ramakrishna
STRIDE, IGNOU, New Delhi

Content Editor

Prof. K. Murugan
Director, School of Humanities
Tamil Nadu Open University,
Chennai

Course Coordination

Mr. Tata Ramakrishna
STRIDE, IGNOU,
New Delhi

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Ms. Promila Soni

Section Officer (Publication)
STRIDE, IGNOU, New Delhi

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MDE-413 : LEARNER SUPPORT SYSTEMS AND SERVICES

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- Unit 1 : Learner Support: A System's Approach
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-

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-

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-

INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

Learner support services are indispensable components of the ODL system (ODLS). It is important not because of its relation to the Distance Education theories, but it is a key for learners' successes and their persistence in the ODL system. It is a fact that in Distance Education, there is the geographical separation of teacher and learner. In addition to it, sociopsychological factors affect the learners in their learning and completing the courses. The sociopsychological factors include language, culture, motivation, inadequate skills or preparation, anxiety, time and work or family constraints. Distance learners, therefore, need various support services that would help them to be successful learners. Learner Support Services (LSS) are treated as learner centered facilitating functions of ODLS which take into account problems of distance learners at pre entry stage, during the course of studies and at the course completion stage. In this regard, it is noted that learner support not only bridges sociopsychological distances, but also fosters learners for their personal development and the accomplishment of learning goals. In the light of the separation of the learner from the teacher, the techniques and mechanisms to provide support assume a significant dimension in the teaching-learning transactions through the distance mode. This course MDE-413 discusses about the concept of various Learner Support Systems and Services and their interrelationship with other elements of ODL, theoretical background of LSS and factors affecting the nature of support services. Some important mechanisms of learner support namely contact programmes, counselling, and distance teaching through tutor comments on assignment responses have been discussed thoroughly. It also describes the institutional mechanisms for providing learning support. After working through this course, you should be able to:

- describe the basic principles and methods of learner support,
- explain the importance of support services in the ODL system,
- discuss learner support services as a sub-system of any ODL institution,
- organize academic counselling and other support services,
- assess and report the performance and progress of distance learners,

This course consists of five blocks. These are:

Block 1: Learner Support: An Introduction — This block discusses the concept of support services as a major component of ODL and various institutional models and arrangements in providing Learners Support Services (LSS).

Block 2: Learner Support: Development of Skills — Various learning skills such as Study skills, Cognitive skills, Problem solving skills, Reading and Writing skills have been discussed to develop a self directed learner.

Block 3: Counselling and Tutoring Services — All the issues related to Counselling and Tutoring services like skills, qualities, media and technology in counselling and organizing counselling and tutoring services have been analyzed.

Block 4: Assessment of Learner Performance — Various components of Assessment in Distance Education like Tutor Comments, Tutoring through Correspondence and Supplemental Interaction have been emphasized.

Block 5: Management of Learner Support — Some important aspects of LSS such as Learners' Expectations in DE, Management of Support Services, and Monitoring Learners' Progress have been analyzed.

Each block of this course consists of four units. We begin each unit with the section 'Introduction' followed by 'Learning Outcomes'. It articulates briefly:

- what we have presented in the unit, and
- what we expect from you once you complete working on the unit.

In the last section of each unit, under the heading, 'Let Us Sum Up', we summarise the whole unit for purposes of recapitulation.

Besides, we have given self-check exercises under the caption 'Check Your Progress' of Self-check Exercises at a few places in each of these units which invariably end with possible answers to the questions set in these exercises.

What you are expected to do is to go through the units and jot down important points in the space provided in the margin. This will help you to make notes and prepare for the examination. At the same time, you will be able to save time during your revision. Therefore, we advise you to use these margins.

We hope that we have given enough space for you to work on the self-check exercises.

The purpose of giving self-check exercises will be served satisfactorily if you compare your answers with the possible ones given at the end of each unit under 'Feedback to Check Your Progress Questions'. You may be tempted to have a furtive glance at possible answer(s), as soon as you come across an exercise. But we do hope that you will overcome the temptation and turn to these possible answers (which are not the best answers necessarily) only after you write your own. These exercises are not meant to be submitted to us for correction or evaluation. Instead, the exercises are to function as study tools to help you keep on the right track as you read the units.

Besides this, counselling is also provided at your study centres for this course. Attending a counselling session will help you to clarify your queries and doubts. Counselling sessions are also the time when you can meet other learners, and see the diverse nature of the learner profile. If your learning style is discussion and interaction based, it is always suggested to attend the counselling sessions. Along with the counselling sessions, there are other media materials, and services available in this course, and you may like to take advantages of these by attending the teleconference sessions/virtual classes as and when conducted. You will receive information about special arrangements regarding this from time to time.

In this course, you have to submit one assignment consisting of both essay type and short answers type questions which carries 25% weightage. We suggest the following norms to be strictly practiced while you are working through the assignments:

- Write your roll number legibly as indicated in the Programme Guide.
- Before you put down anything in words, assimilate what you have read and integrate it with what you have gathered from your experience to build your answer.

- Make the best use of the block and the additional reading materials for diligently working through the assignments.

Beside the assignment, you have to appear for term-end examination for this course which carries 75% weightage.

About this block:

This is the fourth block of the course “Learner Support Systems and Services”. After discussing the issues related to Counselling and Tutoring Services like skills, qualities, media and technology in counselling and organising counselling and tutoring services in the third block, now we will make an attempt to focus on some issues related to assessment of learners’ performance in distance education such as, Tutor Comments, Tutoring through Correspondence and Supplemental Interaction in this block.

We all are familiar with assessment and evaluation. We know the value of examination and its sacred nature to uphold the quality of the teaching-learning process. In distance education as well, these are treated in a similar manner. In spite of the similarities of the rigour in the method of examination, there is certain “newness” in the distance education system with regard to assessment, particularly because of its integration into the teaching-learning process. Therefore, we have discussed various components of assessment of learners’ performance in distance education elaborately in all the units throughout this block.

In the first unit, we have discussed about the unique features of assessment in distance education, and also highlighted different types of assessment and issues related to grading and marking of learners’ performances. You as a distance education professional may use some of the ideas and concepts discussed in this unit in your future engagements with distance education.

The second unit is solely devoted to the analysis of ‘tutor-comments’, their types and significance in the context of distance education. While comprehending the concept ‘tutor-comments’, we have listed out the role of a classroom teacher and identified the crucial tasks performed by a distance tutor, who is to teach effectively through written comments on learners’ assignment responses. We have highlighted all sorts of comments and their significance for learners’ understanding and benefit.

In the third unit we intend to inform you about some **fallacies** which continue to stand in the way of the successful functioning of distance education programmes. We have also discussed the significant **biases** which stand in the way of successful two-way communication between distance learners and distance teachers and we have also suggested the means for overcoming these **fallacies** and **biases**.

In the last unit we aimed at justifying our discussion on the biases of a conventional teacher and highlighting the significance of supplemental communication. We have also touched upon issues such as the ‘prerequisites’ which a distance teacher may expect from his/her teaching more in order to better his/ her performance and make his/her teaching more purposeful. Then, we have discussed notions of submission density of assignment-responses, and tutorials. In this way we have tried to discuss all the components related to assessment of learners’ performance in distance education throughout this block.

UNIT 1 LEARNERS' ASSESSMENT IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Structure

- 1.0 Introduction
- 1.1 Learning Outcomes
- 1.2 Types of Assessment in Distance Education
 - 1.2.1 Self Assessment
 - 1.2.2 Continuous Assessment
 - 1.2.3 Term End Examination
 - 1.2.4 Alternative Assessment Methods
- 1.3 Marking and Grading
- 1.4 Reliability and Validity of Assessment
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 References and Further Readings
- 1.7 Feedback to Check Your Progress Questions

1.0 INTRODUCTION

We all are familiar with assessment and evaluation. We know the value of examination and its sacred nature to uphold the quality of the teaching-learning process. In distance education as well, these are treated in a similar manner. In spite of the similarities of the rigour in the method of examination, there is certain “newness” in the distance education system with regard to assessment, particularly because of its integration into the teaching-learning process. In this unit we shall discuss about the unique features of assessment in distance education, and also highlight different types of assessment and issues related to grading and marking of learners’ performances. This unit is an important aspect of the support service to the learner, and you as a distance education professional may use some of the ideas and concepts discussed here in your future engagements with distance education.

1.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this unit, you are expected to be able to:

- Describe the components of assessment in distance education;
- Distinguish between grading and marking;
- Explain the importance of marking schemes;
- Develop a suitable marking scheme;
- Identify factors affecting the notion of ‘perfect grading’; and
- Discuss reliability and validity of assessment mechanisms.

1.2 TYPES OF ASSESSMENT IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

In the field of educational evaluation a number of terms are used commonly and interchangeably. However, they are not synonymous and have specific connotations. Before, we delve into the issues of assessment in distance education and its types; let us try to define these terms.

Test is a device to obtain quantitative data. This consists of a standard set of questions to be answered or tasks to be performed. It is a most commonly used form of measurement in education. A test usually presents a uniform set of tasks to all members of a given group at a scheduled time with prior notice.

Measurement is an act of assigning numerical index (i.e., quantification) to whatever is being assessed in some meaningful and consistent manner. For example Suresh scored 32 out of 50 in English test. When we assign a score 32/50 on a given test performed by Suresh, we are doing an act of measurement. Measurement only quantifies the data obtained through observations, tests or any other devices.

Assessment refers to the process of obtaining information about a learner's learning, progress and achievement, that is what and how well the learner has learned during and at the end of a course and assigning a value to the performance. For example, Suresh got an 'A' grade or 75% in an assignment response.

Evaluation is a wider and more inclusive term. This includes all the three: test, measurement and assessment. When we compare the score of a learner with those of other learners and judge whether it is good/average/satisfactory/unsatisfactory/bad, we are doing the act of evaluation. In other words, evaluation includes quantitative description, qualitative description and a value judgment.

Evaluation as a process can be categorized into: formative and summative.

Formative Evaluation: It is concerned with identifying learner weaknesses in attainment of specific objectives with a view to help the learner to overcome the same. Tests for formative evaluation are given at regular intervals during a course. Therefore, formative evaluation is also termed as continuous evaluation. In distance education, formative evaluation is done through assignments and self assessment questions in the learning materials.

Summative Evaluation: As the term indicates, it is evaluation at the end of a course, and aims at certifying and grading the attainment of the learner with respect to objectives of a given course. Summative evaluation may also take into consideration the result of the formative evaluation to finalize learners' attainment. As such it includes all such forms of measurement that would give a measure of success of the course as a whole.

Evaluation of learners' attainment of objectives is normally done by three types of questions used in the pen and paper based examinations. These are: Objective type, short answer type and long

answer type/essay type. The short and long answer type questions are generally used to assess the higher order cognitive objectives such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Objective type questions are best suitable, to provide feedback to the learners. The following six major types of objective questions are normally used to assess students' performances:

- True-False
- Matching
- Fill in the blank
- Completion of sentences
- Multiple choice
- Sequencing

In distance education, both formative and summative evaluations are done using a variety of questions: objective, short-answer and long-answer type. These are grouped into three categories: Self-assessment, continuous assessment, and term-end examinations. Besides, we will also discuss some alternative forms of assessment that can be used in distance and online learning situations.

1.2.1 Self-Assessment

In Self Learning Materials (SLM), the Self-Assessment Questions (SAQs) or Check Your Progress (CYP) questions are spread throughout the text to help the learners' check their progress in developing the relevant knowledge and skills and successful attainment of learning objectives. A distance learner would like to know his/her progress. But, there is no teacher to give the feedback (unlike class room face-to-face system). The SAQs are the means to provide feedback in distance learning materials. These are used as formative evaluation tools to help the learners to learn better. These mostly include objective type questions and short-answer questions. Learners are expected to work on these in the space provided or in a note-book. The self-learning material provides answer/feedback to each of these questions. Learners are expected to use this feedback to compare and self-assess their learning.

Check Your Progress 1

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

What is self-assessment?

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1.2.2 Continuous Assessment

Continuous assessment is done in distance education through assignments. Normally assignments carry 25-30% weight in overall

assessment. These could be computer marked or tutor marked and normally include questions of different types. The tutor marked assignments are commonly used as a two-way communication tool between the learner and the distance teaching institution or the tutor/teacher. The distance learners are expected to work on some assignments (usually specified in the Programme Guide) and submit them in their Study Centres. The assignment responses are evaluated by an academic counsellor, who provides grade/marks and teaching type comments to encourage and motivate the learners (more about comments in the next unit). Assignments also help the learner to decrease the sense of isolation as a distance learner.

The feedback on written assignment is important as it is expected to improve the student performance in the next assignment submission. However, for the assessors this is mostly dispiriting, as students return assignments repeating the same mistakes again and again (Crisp, 2007). This may be due to the poor quality of feedback, and yet again point towards the importance of good feedback with sufficient and clearly explained comments.

1.2.3 Term-End Examination

This is the final examination, you are familiar with. It could be organized once or twice in a year depending on institutional policy. These are examinations that are organized as end of course activity, and are mostly pen and paper based. However alternatives such as practical and project are also used to assess learner performance and are treated as final examination. Distance learners are expected to appear in a term-end examination of a course once they have completed the minimum duration and have acquired the necessary knowledge and skills specified in the course. They are normally given option to decide when to appear for the term-end examination. Of course, this flexibility is subject to rules applicable for the course/programme of study. The term-end examination normally carries about 70-75% weight in overall assessment.

1.2.4 Alternative Assessment Methods

While the above three types of assessment are common practice in distance education, and within this objective, short-answer and long answer types questions are used, there are some other forms of assessment that can be used effectively in distance education. We will discuss some of these, in brief, in this sub-section. These are: peer assessment, projects, portfolio, viva-voce/oral examination, internship, and seminar presentation.

Peer Assessment: This method of assessment is used to assess the work done by people of equal status. Mostly peer assessment is used in review of professional publications (books and journal articles). It is believed that in a professional context, the peer-group knows best about developments in a field, and are the best experts to judge a piece of work. Using the same principle in the context of student learning, feedback of peer group can be used in assessment. However, it also brings in resistance and a distrust of the process, when the grade/marks/feedback of the learners is used without moderation for the final grading. Peer assessment is highly useful, when you want your learners to develop skills of assessment and judgment in a particular discipline. Besides, peer assessment is useful in developing

critical understanding of the discipline/topic/subject, and promotes skills of group work. It is most widely used in online group discussions in the form of peer rating of the postings. However, to use the peer assessment in the final grading, many give only a fifty percent weight to the summated rating of the peer group, and add the tutor assessment as the other fifty percent weight.

Project Assessment: The use of project as assessment provides the learners with practical skills, and also abilities to communicate their work effectively. The projects can be product based or a process based activities, but at the end both result in reports. Project based assessments are useful to help students to:

- explore a topic of interest deeply;
- develop skills of independent inquiry;
- develop time and project management skills;
- provide personal ownership of learning; and
- foster scientific and creative problem solving skills.

In order to use projects as assessment methods, you need to be clear about the primary objective of the course. Particularly in distance education set up, it is important that a comprehensive manual is available to the learners to clarify doubts. The project manual should cover and explain the issues related to supervision, assessment procedures, length of the project, duration of work, referencing style etc. Most institutions use oral examination as additional assessment to authenticate the work done by the distance learners in project.

Portfolio Assessment: Portfolios have generated a good deal of interest in education in the recent past. Portfolio is a systematic record of the works of a student to showcase achievement of certain set of objectives over a period of time. It may include work samples, description of the work, student reflection, etc. The portfolio has the following advantages:

- It measures student's ability over a period of time.
- It is criterion oriented, and the criteria is known to the student.
- It is embedded in the instructional process, and support and guidance are given throughout.
- It helps the learner to do self assessment.
- It captures different facets of learning.
- It helps the learner to be creative and independent.

The use of portfolio as an assessment tool is used in professional and vocational subjects such as fashion, art and management. However, portfolio is getting popular in other disciplines with the advent of online portfolio systems. E-Portfolio has become an important way to show the progress a student over a period of time to the prospective employers. It is through portfolio that we can understand the willingness of a person to learn, and his/her ability to take feedback positively, and also use of personal reflection in the process of learning and development.

Oral Examination: This is normally done in the form of viva-voce at the end of a project or when we want to know the language proficiency of a learner. Oral examinations can also be used in the form of group discussions. Mostly it is used to screen candidates in job placements to know about leadership and team abilities. Oral examination is also possible with the use of online technology, particularly synchronous audio conferencing.

Seminar Presentation: Besides the language proficiency, leadership abilities and team spirit, it is also important to know and develop students' ability to make effective presentations. In professional courses, it is expected that learners are proficient in the art of presentations. When a student has done in-depth study and research in an area, his/her confidence is shown in the clarity of the presentation and the way he/she makes the presentation. It also shows the persuasion ability of the learner, as the presentations can be made creatively using many technologies. In online examinations that use term papers to assess student learning, online presentations are also used.

Internship: The use internship is not normally done for the purpose of assessment. It is usually done in the form of giving actual work experience to the learner. So, in highly skill based courses, internship is used to give hands on experience to the learners to handle actual projects, machines, and tools to work and learn the tricks of the trade on the floor. Students are attached to supervisors/mentors who provide critical inputs and support to the learners to rectify their mistakes and learn. In some institutions, the learners are expected to prepare a report of their experience in the internship for assessment. In such a case the supervisor also provides a specific confidential report to the faculty about the work experience of the learner, which forms part of the total assessment.

Check Your Progress 2

- Notes:** a) Space is given below for your answer.
b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

What do you understand by Oral Examination?

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1.3 MARKING AND GRADING

Learner performance vis-à-vis the course objectives can be reported with the help of numerical marks. However, in all forms of education, either classroom or distance, grading is slowly replacing marks. In distance education both quantifiable marking and grading are used to report student performance. Though grading is the favoured practice world over, in Indian situation marking is also used to avoid the problem of conversion of grades into marks particularly to facilitate mobility of distance learners to other institutions. We are familiar with the marking scheme that follows a 0-100 scale, and accordingly

absolute scores are given to student performances in examination/test/assignment within this scale. However, the scale in the grading pattern could be five points, seven points or nine points. IGNOU follows a five point grade system with the notional values given in Table-1.1.

Table-1.1: Grading Pattern at IGNOU

Letter Grade	Quality Level	Point Grade	Point Grade Range
A	Excellent	5	4.5 and above
B	Very Good	4	3.5 but less than 4.5
C	Good	3	2.5 but less than 3.5
D	Satisfactory	2	1.5 but less than 2.5
E	Unsatisfactory	1	Below 1.5

At IGNOU different programmes follow different schemes: marking and grading. In some 35% is pass mark, in others 40% is pass mark; while courses that use grading system C is pass in some, whereas in some D is pass grade. In some programmes average 'C' in term-end examinations and assignment is pass grade, while in others students have to receive 'C' in both assignments and term-end examinations to pass. In the grading pattern, each answer is evaluated and graded separately, and at the end a cumulative grade is given based on the point grade. Thus, missing questions in a test or assignment affect the average grade in a course.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) in 1973 through a publication entitled "Examination Reform – A Plan of Action" emphasized the need for making the assessment system accurate, familiar and simple. It said, the student result should depict accurately the level of academic achievement of the learner whether grading or marking is used. The meaning of the mark/grade should be clear to all the stakeholders, and it should be simple to interpret. The Monograph on Grading for Universities published by the Association of Indian Universities in 1977 gives the following reasons against the marking system:

- The marking system does not reflect accurately the academic achievement of the learners due to marker variability.
- The 80 marks received in Mathematics and History is not comparable, due to subject difference.
- The marks are not absolute, though they show numerical position. Research shows that there is a variability of 5% in student marks. Thus a student getting raw 41 marks would range between 36 and 46.

Grades on the other hand use a smaller scale in comparison to marks (0-100) and shows brevity in assignment of value to student performance. The variability of mark and the difference between 59 and 60 gets reduced with emphasis on the relative qualities associated with the grades. It is not clear as to why a paper is always 100 marks, and when a grading system is followed, the focus shifts from marks to the content and what the student has learned vis-à-vis the expectations as different levels of the grading system. Even if subjectivity in

assessment can't be ruled out due to marker variability, it has also been observed that there is lesser variation in grades awarded by various examiners than in the marks awarded by them. However the grades are also criticized for lack of clarity of meaning, lack of sufficient empirical evidence, and difference in the scales used. Thus, a 'perfect grading' or flawless grading is impossible to ascertain. Even if, we do get a system in place for flawless grading, it will be difficult to convince others of its validity and reliability (issues that we will discuss in the next section). We will discuss in this section some issues related with grading and marking to make the process of assessment error free to the best possible extent.

Marking/Grading Scheme

The use of a marking/grading scheme is one of the best ways to reduce marker variability. Morgan and O'Reilly (1999) suggested marking scheme often contain the following:

- Criteria to evaluate the assignment, such as understanding of the concept, argument, structure, presentation, etc.
- Details of each criterion including what is expected; and
- Percentage weight or actual mark for each criterion.

While marking scheme should be prepared for every set of question separately, it is a difficult and time consuming process. So, marking scheme can also be generic in nature. One such generic scheme that has been tested in many disciplines is the Structured Observation of Learning Outcomes [SOLO developed by Biggs (1999)]. We present here two examples of generic marking scheme.

Example 1: Marking Scheme (Source: Morgan & O'Reilly (1999))	
High distinction (85-100)	Consistently high level of synthesis of ideas and arguments; original and thought provoking ideas; evidence of systematic and creative use of sources, extremely pleasing prose.
Distinction (75-84)	Understands and systematically compares theories and concepts; evidence of wide use of sources, makes critical comments, sustained arguments, stylish composition.
Credit (65-74)	Concepts and theory well applied, some useful insights, reasonable use of sources, reasonable arguments, although could be improved.
Pass (50-64)	Readable; descriptive rather than analytical, a limited use of sources, seeks to address major issues; acceptable although major improvements possible.
Fail (below 50)	No significant grasp of concepts, irrelevant material included, incomplete, unreadable, misunderstands the topic, little evidence of significant effort.

Example 2: Grading Criteria based on Biggs (1999) Structure of the Observed Learning Outcomes (SOLO) Taxonomy		
SOLO Level	Description	Grade
1. Pre-structural	The task itself is not attacked in an appropriate way. The student has not understood the point.	E
2. Uni-structural	One relevant aspect of task is picked up and there is no relationship between facts or ideas. Understanding is nominal.	D
3. Multi-structural	Several (two or more) independent aspects are picked up or understood serially but are not interrelated.	C
4. Relational	Relevant aspects are integrated into an overall coherent structure.	B
5. Extended abstract	The coherent whole is generalised or re-conceptualised to a higher level of abstraction.	A

Assessor's Perception of the Lesson/Unit

In distance education the first task of the assessor is to study the unit carefully and see what the course-writers want to convey through it, and that while assessing an assignment-response he/she should not be carried away by his/her own knowledge of the subject-matter but should instead see what the learner is expected to achieve, and judge the learner's performance accordingly. However, it has been observed that assessor's own understanding of the subject matter being assessed play a significant role in his/her assessment of the work on hand.

Assessor's Perception of the Assignment

When evaluating a response by a student, the assessor uses something which is conceptually called Assessor's Ideal Response (AIR). This may be a real or imaginary answer. But, this is what the assessor uses to give the grading. However, the assessor may understand the question in a different way than it is expected. Sometimes faulty questioning adds to the problem. A faulty perception of the question may cause errors in assessment. To overcome this difficulty we have suggested two ways (i) guidance from the course writers, and (ii) appropriate orientation for the assessors to help them look through the assignment clearly.

Tendencies Towards being Lenient or Strict

Everyone has a tendency to be strict/lenient when it comes to assessment of student performance. This is a personality factor of the assessor, and there is little that can be done other than providing guidance and training in assessing specific course in distance education set up.

Assessor's Attention Span

Research shows that the assessors' 'attention span' reduces as they evaluate more student responses. Attention span here refers to the ability of the assessor to objectively evaluate a response over a specific

time period. Depending on the nature of assignment/final answer script, the attention span may be 2-3 at one go. So, an evaluator with three as attention span may evaluate the 4th script onwards differently than expected. This will significantly affect the results of the learners. While the affect could be increase or decrease in the student grade, the ultimate result is non-reflection of accurate grade. In order to reduce the problem of attention span, the assessors should be given more time to evaluate the answer scripts so that they do not assess student responses quickly and unconsciously be affected by the attention span syndrome. It has been observed from practice by the author that evaluation of one assignment response take about 30 minutes time (this may differ from subject to subject), and thus, evaluating 3-4 assignments continuously brings in fatigue of the mind. Therefore, it is suggested that evaluation of student assignment may be done slowly and carefully.

Issues in Assignment Handling

Read the following dialogue between two academic Counsellors.

If you read the above conversation carefully, the following issues would be evident:

- | | |
|------|--|
| AC1: | <i>Did you see the live telecast of the cricket match last night?</i> |
| AC2: | <i>No. I evaluated 30 assignments last night and it took about two hours of time. I was tired.</i> |
| AC1: | <i>Really! It takes me much longer time to evaluate assignments. It takes about 30-45 minutes for me to evaluate one assignment response.</i> |
| AC2: | <i>I do the grading rather fast, as I can really see the worth of what the student has done. But, it is so boring, you know...</i> |
| AC1: | <i>I don't just provide grade, but also write the comments after thorough reading.</i> |
| AC2: | <i>Definitely, giving personal tutor comments would take that much of time. But, you know it is difficult to spend so much time for assignment evaluation, particularly when you have hundreds to evaluate over the weekend.</i> |
| AC1: | <i>I can understand. It is difficult when you also need to maintain a record of the student assignment.</i> |
| AC2: | <i>I appreciate your efforts to write personal comments. I was told of the same in a workshop about assignments in distance education. But, the workload is so high that it is practically impossible to write comments.</i> |
| AC1: | <i>Students also need to be told about the grades before the term-end examinations...</i> |

- Turn-around time of assignment
- Number of assignments to be evaluated and workload
- Importance of record keeping
- Writing tutor comments (to be discussed in the next Unit)

Let us discuss the other three issues.

Record Keeping: Assignment records are kept at the study centre.

However, if as an academic counsellor, you maintain a register for the assignments evaluated by you, it would be useful to provide personalized comments related to progress and performance of the learners. Record keeping shall also help to reduce unnecessary duplication of work. You can also have a proper accounting of the payments received for the evaluation by keeping a record. Time spent on this account is definitely an advantage.

Number of Assignments: How many assignments should be evaluated by an academic counsellor at a time? This is a pedagogic question that most of the time answered through an administrative and managerial viewpoint. More assignments for evaluation and less time is a frequent problem faced by evaluators. Ideally 20-25 assignments evaluation per week is OK, if the academic counsellor can spend about two hours daily. In order to reduce this problem, there should be more number of academic counsellors to evaluate the assignment responses.

Turn-around Time: By turn-around time we mean the amount of time it takes to reach the evaluated assignment back to the student. At IGNOU, the turn-around time is 6-8 weeks. Ideally, the evaluated assignment responses should be returned before the due date for the next assignment in the same course. If the assignments reach the learners late, the significance of tutor comments for the learners would be lost.

Check Your Progress 3

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

What do you mean by turn-around time?

.....

.....

.....

.....

1.4 RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY OF ASSESSMENT

Reliability and validity are two psychological measures of the quality of assessment used. When the assessment is of high value stake, it is important that the reliability of the assessment used is sufficiently high. If the reliability is low, then validity of the assessment is also seriously compromised.

Reliability says is the system reliable every time it is used? Does it assess the same learning outcomes accurately every time it does? It is possible to have reliability in standardized tests and for large scale public examinations. However, teacher prepared questions always show low reliability. The issue of reliability is more prominent at the stage of grading/marking. Especially due to various reasons discussed earlier, the reliability of assessment may decrease. To improve reliability some institutions also use double marking system. However, the use of specific marking scheme shall also improve reliability in assessment, especially in distance learning systems where there are large number of

students to be assessed. The Korean National Open University (KNOU) uses objective type assessment in the term-end examination to improve reliability of the system.

If assessment is valid, then it should measure what it is supposed to. It is something like 'fitness for purpose'. Mostly validity is determined by a consensus approach, and therefore, Universities use moderation board to validate the question papers. This is also considered 'face validity'.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we discussed assessment related issues in distance education. While we do assessment almost in all walks of life, and almost in all activities, this is something very critical in the process of certification in education system. We clarified the concepts such as test, assessment and evaluation as related terms with different meanings, and then went on to discuss different types of commonly used assessment techniques in distance education: self-assessment, continuous assessment and term-end examination. We also listed some of the alternative forms of assessment that are becoming popular in distance and online education. Under this, we discussed peer-assessment, portfolio, project, internship, oral examination and seminar presentation highlighting their specific purposes and usage.

In this unit, we also discussed the issues related to reporting to student performance through grading and marking. While, we emphasized that grading has advantages over marking scheme, it was also indicated that in distance education systems both these forms of reporting are used. However, it is important to make the system of assessment more robust by taking care of the issues related to marking scheme, assessor's perception of the unit, assessor's ideal response, and assessor's attention span. We also emphasized that for any assessment system to be credible, its reliability and validity need to be established.

1.6 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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1.7 FEEDBACK TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

Check Your Progress 1

When a learner does the Check Your Progress questions given in the units and compare his/her answers with the answer written at the end of the unit, is known as self-assessment. In this situation, no teacher is involved to assess your progress. This is the result. The Check Your Progress questions are objective type questions and short answer questions.

Check Your Progress 2

This is normally done in the form of viva-voce at the end of a project or when we want to know the language proficiency of a learner. Oral examinations can also be used in the form of group discussions. Mostly it is used to screen candidates in job placements to know about leadership and team abilities. Oral examination is also possible with the use of online technology, particularly synchronous audio conferencing.

Check Your Progress 3

By turn-around time we mean the amount of time it takes to reach the evaluated assignment back to the student. At IGNOU, the turn-around time is 6-8 weeks. Ideally, the evaluated assignment responses should be returned before the due date for the next assignment in the same course. If the assignments reach the learners late, the significance of tutor comments for the learners would be lost.

UNIT 2 TUTOR COMMENTS

Structure

- 2.0 Introduction
- 2.1 Learning Outcomes
- 2.2 Identifying a Distance Tutor
 - 2.2.1 Role of a Classroom Teacher
 - 2.2.2 Role of a Distance Tutor
- 2.3 Significance of Tutor Comments
 - 2.3.1 Academic Communication
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 - 2.3.3 Supplemental Communication
- 2.4 Types of Tutor Comments
 - 2.4.1 Harmful Comments
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 - 2.4.7 Constructive Comments
 - 2.4.8 Global Comments
 - 2.4.9 Personal Comments
- 2.5 Lets Sum Up
- 2.6 References and Further Readings
- 2.7 Feedback to Check Your Progress Questions

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Tutor-comments play a vital role in distance education setup. Learners stay at distant places while pursuing their courses in distance education institutions/universities. So, face-to-face contact between tutor/teacher and learners is not possible always, and it is minimal when it takes place. Thus, distance teaching has to be carried out mainly by means of SLMs and 'comments' on learners' assignment-responses. To explain, unlike a student in a face-to-face educational institution, the distance learner usually finds it difficult to meet the teacher concerned or tutor whenever s/he wants to.

A distance learner gets academic support from his/her assignment-responses in the form of tutor-comments. So, a tutor plays a vital role by giving inputs to the learner for the growth and development of his/her learning the contents. If a tutor fails to provide proper comments, then the whole purpose of distant learning will be distorted. This unit is solely devoted to the analysis of 'tutor-comments', their types and significance in the context of distance education. While comprehending the concept 'tutor-comments', we have listed out the role of a classroom teacher and identified the crucial tasks performed by a distance tutor, who is to teach effectively through written comments on learners' assignment-responses.

In distance education settings, unlike face-to-face educational institutions, the missing component is lack of interaction between the teacher/tutor and the taught. To bridge up this phenomenon tutor-comments play a major role in distance education institutions. A tutor, who is also known as 'distance teacher', has to teach in the correspondence mode through written comments and rarely conducts face-to-face sessions in the context of distance education.

In the previous unit, you studied about the assignments and their types in the context of distance education. In addition to that, you also studied how to write the assignment responses, the purpose of writing assignments and some other issues pertaining to assignments. In this unit, you will be explained what is the role of a tutor in relation to learners' assignment responses, how a tutor can make comments on learner assignment responses to interact with them and later help them for their academic growth in higher studies.

2.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

This unit helps you to identify the distance tutor and his/her role in giving comments on learners' assignment responses. We highlight all sorts of comments and their significance for learners' understanding and benefit.

After working through this unit, you should be able to:

- Analyze the significance of tutor comments;
- Discuss various types of tutor comments;
- Identify a distance tutor; and
- Explain different levels of 'communication'.

2.2 IDENTIFYING A DISTANCE TUTOR

A distance tutor, in the strict sense, won't be called a tutor or teacher but an examiner who guides learners in their teaching-learning activities. A tutor collects relevant information on a particular course and guides the learners according to their needs. He/she prepares the basic reading lists and designs the learning tasks (assignments) and other types of worksheets suitable for the course objectives. The distance learners are expected to study the course units and answer the assignments in written form. The assignment responses are assessed and awarded with grades by the tutor and sent back to the learners. The internal assessment grades and the final examination grades put together decide the final grades. The same procedures may not be applicable to all the Certificate, Diploma and Degree programmes. But, certainly all programmes have assessment and evaluation procedures. This analysis supports our view that the distance tutor is an examiner.

To understand clearly the responsibilities of a distance teacher we need to bring out the differences between the nature of work entrusted with a distance teacher and a face-to-face teacher. We must admit and accept that teachers in both the domains are not radically different from each other in the context of nature of work. The commonalities are: evaluated assignment-responses, preparation of question papers for the students to assess and evaluate them, guide the students in their

learning activities, make them easier to understand certain difficult issues involved in their study. The differences are discussed in detail in the following sub-sections.

2.2.1 Role of a Classroom Teacher

A typical institute of face-to-face education where classroom teaching is an obvious phenomenon, textbooks alone do not have any impact on learning. Through classroom teacher's active role, the content presented in the textbooks becomes the sheer knowledge of the student. A classroom teacher makes efforts on students' learning when the knowledge transfer takes place from teacher to students (on many occasions from students to teachers also) through demonstration, explanation, and arguments on different issues. The physical presence of a teacher in the classroom, his/her smiles, elbow movements, eye contact with the students help them in the process of their transferring knowledge. Thus, in the classroom scenario both the teacher and the taught play major roles for learning to take place effectively.

Highlighting the classroom teacher as an inspirer and holy guide for the students, and believing that they are the key for the transformation and transmission of knowledge to the students, a basic question crops up. If teaching in a classroom and physical presence of teacher were the only factors responsible for a learner's success, then there should be no failures in the regular public examinations like matriculation, intermediate, etc.

This argument claims that the learner himself/herself is an important factor in the teaching-learning situation. Whatever means a teacher adopts for him/her to learn, it will fail if a learner does not want to learn. Thus, it is the learner who must take initiative in the teaching learning activities. When the learner has interest in learning, his/her capacity for learning, attitude to learning also play significant role in the mode of learning. It conveys that learning is primarily a learner centred activity where a learner can also learn in a distance situation. The classroom teacher is simply a facilitator who delivers content to students which is available in the textbooks. This does not bring any difference to learners if they wish to read and understand the materials by themselves with some sort of interaction with the tutors. This facility is available in the distance education setup. In this juncture, an important question may arise: Who would be a distance tutor?

2.2.2 Role of a Distance Tutor

As it has been explained above, a distance tutor does more than a classroom teacher does in the face-to-face educational institutions. A classroom teacher assists learners in going through the relevant materials in relation to the discussion that took place orally in the classroom. The materials referred to the students will be available in library or accessible by browsing internet resources. In a nut-shell, a classroom teacher helps learners to go through the written materials by informing them where these are available. A distance teacher does the same but in different ways. He/she guides the students not through the 'word of mouth' but through 'word of hand' (i.e writing comments on learners' assignment responses). Thus, at the theoretical or ground level, there are resemblances between a classroom teacher and his/her counterpart at the distance teaching institution. This resemblance may not be prominent if we consider the level of performance. This is so

because their modes of operation are not the same. A classroom teacher, by implication, discusses, delivers, and talks to the students on the study content. Hence, it is claimed that he/she may guide, inspire, and help learners in their learning activities. On the contrary, though these situations do not occur often, it is evident that a distance teacher who works through assignment-responses may choose even not to write any comments or replies at all.

In this context, the most important issue is, if a distance teacher wishes to help the learner, he/she should not only give the grades at the top of assignment responses but also communicate his comments corresponding to the course-units to the learners. The distance teacher who just gives the grades and does not write any comments on the assignment-responses would be called as a mere examiner but not a distance teacher.

There are innumerable situations where distance teachers handle assignment responses without giving proper attention and devotion which should be expected from them.

The possible reasons for such incidents are:

- i) The teacher may not be liking his/her work but forcefully or hesitantly does the task under some obligation.
- ii) He/she does not read the assignment responses but grades them, just to maintain the record that he/she has done his/her duty.
- iii) He/she reads the assignment responses but has no time to write the comments on it.
- iv) He/she may not be knowing the significance of comments in pedagogic perspectives.
- v) He/she does not know what to write in comments.
- vi) He/she is scared of writing any comments on assignment-responses because the write up may be criticised by other examiners.
- vii) He/she does not know the students personally, therefore writing comments on their assignment-responses may not be worthy.

All these issues arise because in many cases, the distance teacher is seconded from the parent departments of face-to-face universities. The obvious solution would be, unwilling teachers should not be seconded for distance teaching nor should we appoint people who are not willing to undertake the tasks peculiar to distance teaching, such as evaluating the Term-End Examination (TEE) scripts and writing comments on assignment-responses. In some situations, a distance teacher is given many tasks to do at one go. Hence it is obvious that s/he will be running short of time. Hence, writing comments on assignment responses may not be possible. This is an administrative problem which should be sincerely taken care of and a required number of staff should be deputed to carry out the office works.

2.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF TUTOR COMMENTS

Distance learners at large are new to distance education system and its various functions. Hence, it is the necessary duty of a tutor to initiate communication in straightway to the learners, and it is possible

through his/her comments. Thus, tutor-comments play a significant role in distance education as a principal vehicle carrying feedback to the learners for their effective learning. While communicating to the learners the tutor must be aware of levels of communication.

There are three levels of communication. These are:

- i) Academic Communication
- ii) Personal Communication
- iii) Supplemental Communication

We shall discuss these three levels of communication by focusing the significance of tutor-comments in distance education.

2.3.1 Academic Communication

At this level, the functions of a distance tutor are as follows:

- a) Read the assignment-responses without missing lines or passages.
- b) Write comments on assignment-responses by identifying the particular issues/points.
- c) Evaluate the assignment-responses by grading/markings them honestly as they deserve.

The tutor-comments should be written by correlating and comparing his/her own interpretation of a particular course-unit with the corresponding learner-response in terms of both content and presentation. The content of the course-unit, the tutor's own expertise in the field, the corresponding expertise of his/her colleagues, and his/her own idea of the ideal response (to a particular assignment) form the basis of comments and grades finally given. It should also be mentioned here that the tutor's idea of the ideal response is a variable that is affected as much by personal views as by the range and variety of the assignment-responses received.

To teach effectively through distance mode a tutor must understand each learner personally. He/she has to address every learner individually by writing comments on their assignment-responses. Not practicing like the classroom teacher who addresses a bunch of students at one go, he/she as a distance tutor addresses learners individually by writing comments on their assignment-responses. This is obviously a challenging and more difficult task in comparison to a classroom teacher's duty in the face-to-face educational institution. A tutor does the following activities.

- a) Correct the learner and offer guidance where s/he may have gone wrong;
- b) Elaborate on what he/she may have attempted summarily;
- c) Point out and confirm the acceptable aspects of his/her responses;
- d) Assess the level of his/her achievement and explain in the basis of that assessment so as to ensure better learner performance in the future.

These activities are done by a tutor repeatedly over and over again with every learner. This work needs much attention and patience. The

tutor while writing comments on assignment responses must focus on the following factors.

- i) In many situations, learners are found isolated from their peer groups.
- ii) In most cases, learners are adult and hence they have several social commitments and domestic responsibilities.
- iii) In addition to all these, a learner needs to complete the course/ programme on time.
- iv) In some cases, learners join a distance education programme after a long gap of their study.

With all these difficulties, a learner is pursuing his/her career in distance education. Keeping all these facts in mind, a tutor must come forward to help the learner overcome the possible difficulties. Academic help is received by learners from tutors only through written comments. Hence, a tutor plays a pivotal role for encouraging and inspiring learners in their learning activities.

Now, we will discuss the non-academic communication sought by distance learners. Before attempting to do that let's do the following exercise.

Check Your Progress 1

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

List out the activities of a distance tutor with reference to academic communication.

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2.3.2 Personal Communication

Distance learners by and large try to hide their weaknesses and project themselves as learned and experienced persons. In specific, they don't want to look small in the eyes of others. This behavioural syndrome is somehow reflected from their assignment-responses which is easily diagnosed and recognised by the tutor since He/she interacts with the learners on many occasions. Since distance learners are heterogeneous (have various socio-economic and cultural status) their reflection on the assignment-responses reflect their characteristics. In this context, assignment-response is also treated as a product of a learner's 'attitude' towards and 'understanding' of the course content. It may so happen that in order to veil their shortcomings learners flatter the distance teacher and express negative attitude towards distance education system in wider perspectives and their courses, programme, and modes of learning in particular. In this situation they need a personal communication from the tutor which may warm up them to understand their situations and try to overcome their lacunas. The nature of personal comments are such that the learner feels the

teacher's presence before him/her and receives supports in his/her study activities both on academic and personal issues those pop up in course of his/her study.

Personal communication motivates and encourages learners. It reduces the feeling of isolation among the learners and sustains their interest in studies. It guides them to achieve their learning objectives. It also helps in giving emotional strength to the learners which empowers their reasons and rationality on many occasions. To understand it in a better way let us take an example. A learner writes to the tutor,

"Sir, I had communicated to you in our last meeting in the study centre that I was having all responsibilities to arrange my sister's marriage since my parents are no more. I am going through a different stage of my life. Hope you can understand me. I am sunk with all debts and now the priority for me to repay all the debts. As a result, I am not able to concentrate on my studies and in addition to that the examination date is closer. So, please help me what I should do now".

Another letter from a different learner,

"You are so personal and caring to me that I could not resist myself to praise your concern to me. You are not just a teacher you are more than our parents. You guide me in all stages of my life that I realize even in subconscious stage. Further to say, your advices are really worthy for my life. A teacher like you may stand as an example for the whole teacher community. As you are aware of my problem and concerns, can I request you for your help in my academic endeavour?"

These two letters project different situations and demand different personal responses to them. The earlier one is a genuine problem raised by the learner whereas the later one is a flattery which indirectly seeks lift up without any labour and content reading. In this situation, the tutor should not only guide the learners to proceed on the correct path but also communicate to them with personal feelings and care. The teacher may not communicate anything to the learner with reference to the second letter because he/she loses interest by reading the unnecessary and unwanted flattery. Personal communication always starts with warm greetings, followed by content, a few suggestions, and ends with a personal touch.

The main purpose of this communication is to motivate and encourage the learner to do their study tasks in time. Thus, to sustain their motivation in their respective programmes and in the Open and Distance Learning system the tutor must address their issues very carefully, meaningfully, purposefully, and intentionally. Hence, while writing any personal comments the distance teacher must ensure that they are well thought-out, deliberate, palatable, precise and purposeful.

2.3.3 Supplemental Communication

Supplemental communication is an additional communication to both academic and personal communication. But it has its own importance in distance education context. This communication has nonetheless benefited learners a lot in various ways. It guides the learners in correct learning, clarifies doubts, supports to work on their shortcomings, and assists them in acquiring different skills. It suggests that communication can never be an end process if both parties do not have any desire to end it.

This sort of communication may be initiated either by a learner or by a tutor. Some learners wish to know why they have secured low grades in their assignment-responses. They react strongly to the comments written by the tutor on their assignment-responses. In this regard, learners wish to know about their positions from the tutor by clarifying the grades. When learners require previous question papers and their model answers for preparing for Term-End Examinations (TEE), then they can write to the tutors. When learners find difficulty in solving/answering the previous question papers they may seek help from the tutor. On the distance teacher's side, when he/she thinks that a particular model question is difficult to be answered by the learners, s/he can provide the model answers to it and make it available to all the learners. He/she can clarify learners' objections towards the grades that they have received. These issues are considered as supplemental communication but are not limited to only these phenomena. Supplemental Communication also encompasses the large number of issues pertaining to the distance learners who are heterogeneous in character.

From an operational point of view, all the queries raised by the learners in relation to their grades in their assignment-responses alert the tutor and do awake him/her to the task of giving justice to the task of distance teaching. It is both complex and challenging for a tutor to understand all learners and respond to their queries both from the academic point of view and from personal perspectives. To attend to these unique tasks, it is suggested that tutors should update themselves from time to time and act accordingly as the situation demands. All these possibilities are replicated as positive signs for the growth and progress of effective distance teaching-learning transaction.

After discussing these two ways of communication, which are major ingredients of distance education system, let us focus on the issues; 'what comments to make' and 'how to write them'.

2.4 TYPES OF TUTOR-COMMENTS

In the previous sections, we tried to make you understand why tutor comments need to be written on learners' assignment-responses, and what they are all about. In this section, you will find a detailed analysis of types of tutor comments. Due to the various extraneous factors and unavoidable circumstances, it is practically impossible to write what we call "well thought-out" comments as it demands precision and pedagogical purposefulness.

Let us take a few samples of comments written by untrained distance teachers and put them into a few groups by identifying their common characteristics. This will help us in identifying some general categories of comments and improving our understanding of those comments. Before noting down a list of comments you may be interested in knowing "why there are discussions on what and how of tutor-comments". There is plenty of literature available on how a teacher should teach in a classroom situation, but, not much has been done in evolving techniques of teaching at a distance.

"Tutor-comments" are being introduced to overcome the dilemma that in distance education system there are no interactions between teachers and learners and hence, no guidance to the learners' learning processes.

These comments play a major role for the distance learners to know their shortcomings and work upon these to remove the study barriers. Hence, they get oriented to achieve their predetermined goals.

Let us now read the comments extracted from the assignment-responses evaluated by various untrained distance teachers.

1. *Bad sentences! Learn to frame sentences with grammar.*
2. *You are totally confused while answering the questions.*
3. *Try to avoid jargon if it is not clear to you.*
4. *What is this? Did you understand the question? What has it asked for?*
5. *Don't bluff in your assignment-responses. Re-read the unit and write properly in your next assignment-responses.*
6. *Read the unit once again and see the questions asked in the assignments.*
7. *Before writing anything, develop organisational skills.*
8. *Since your answer to the assignment is not so good, you have been awarded with "B" Grade.*
9. *Rework on your answers and try to improve on it.*
10. *I believe you have not understood the question correctly. Hence, concentrate on the questions and see what it asks for.*
11. *You have dumped irrelevant materials.*
12. *Re-do your answers and strike out the unnecessary portions.*
13. *You need a conscious reading of the Units.*
14. *Your presentation is good. Keep it up.*
15. *You have written what you know but not what the question demands.*
16. *What is this? All are irrelevant.*
17. *Work on the Units and redo the assignment.*
18. *You have given too many examples. They are correct, but writing one example can solve the purpose as well as save your time.*
19. *Your initial passages of the second answer are good. Please try to maintain that.*
20. *Completely vague, not clear!*
21. *You need to write something more on this issue with concrete examples. Your answers are not adequate.*
22. *You have not made proper diagram of...*
23. *It seems you need some clarity in your understanding of Unit-04 of Block-03.*
24. *Please avoid either too short or too long answers.*

25. *You have made a good attempt to write this assignment. Please maintain the spirit.*
26. *It would have been better if you had discussed these issues point wise, such as: a, b, c...*
27. *You have missed some of the important issues in your answers. Try to incorporate all the possible discussions.*
28. *Try to maintain neat and clean answer scripts which may create good impression about you.*
29. *Present your thoughts logically, and analytically. You may secure good grades.*

Now it is the time to read the types of tutor-comments by referring to the appropriate comments mentioned above.

2.4.1 Harmful (HL) Comments

The comments ranging from 01 to 05 are harmful because they never encourage learners rather depress them in their studies. They put off learners because the nature of this sort of comments is crude and unsupportive. These comments fail to build the purposeful rapport between learners and teachers. It even blocks all the possible future communication. Learners who are emotional and sensitive feel hurt and annoyed by reading such remarks. They start not only avoiding the tutor concerned but also hating him/her in true sense, and become indifferent to the subject content dealt with. As a consequence, they drop out of the course or hesitate to pursue their courses further. A few learners may write back to the tutors for justifying these rude comments. In many circumstances the tutor justifies his/her remarks, but that does not further lead to any sort of purposeful communication in future. To be precise, the tutor who writes these harmful comments fails to communicate with the learners purposefully. Hence, the interest of learners' gets affected and damaged.

2.4.2 Hollow (HW) Comments

Observe the comments from 06 to 14. They are simply concatenation of words but don't specify any specific meaning. One can't make out any sense out of these comments. Thus, these comments are treated as 'hollow' comments. For example, "Rework on your answers and try to improve on it". In this comment nothing is indicated in specific. The learner may fail to understand which part of the assignment s/he needs to improve upon and where s/he needs to rework. Consider comment 11, "You have dumped irrelevant materials". Here, a learner may seek to know what are those portions which are considered as irrelevant materials. Once the learner comes to know these comments on specific portions of their answers, then they can rework on their shortcomings to improve on their studies. Thus, the hollow comments do not convey anything purposefully and specifically.

2.4.3 Misleading (MG) Comments

The nature of these comments is such that they never encourage learners in their learning activities but push them towards the wrong track and discourage the learners. These sorts of comments are identified when tutor asks learners to do something but that does not

serve any purpose. Remarks on learners' method of learning, the environment in which it takes place are also considered as misleading comments. Read comment 17. Tutor clearly instructed the learner to rework on the units and redo the assignments. If the learner does it honestly with all hesitation still he/she won't be able to understand where the problem lies, what he/she needs to improve and where to improve, etc. These questions appear in a learner's mind because they do not specify where the learner needs to rectify or concentrate. This is so because the comments are not purposive. Just redoing the assignment does not yield any good fruit. There is every possibility that learners may do the same mistakes again. Thus, it is requested that tutors should not provide misleading comments. There should be comments written consciously for the learners for their benefit. To avoid harmful, hollow and misleading comments, a tutor needs deliberate effort and should take precautions before writing remarks. The last but not the least, it is suggested that a tutor should not scribe any sort of these comments in learners' assignment responses under any circumstances.

2.4.4 Null (NL) Comments

The comments that don't confirm, illustrate, approve, question, explain, refute anything are considered as null comments. They include all sorts of sign marks, such as question marks, double question marks, double check marks, underlining, circling, side brackets, etc. These marks signify tutor has gone thorough the script but in no way help learners to understand where their problem lies. In a sense, they don't guide learners to identify what they need to concentrate for future assignment-responses and why such answers are not correct. These comments are not helpful for the learners.

Such comments become valuable if there are fixed verbal comments assigned for each symbol and these are communicated to the learners much earlier before the submission of their assignment-responses. This symbolic communication will work with the mutual consent of both tutors and learners.

In a different situation, the tutor could use these symbols to tone down the adverse effects of writing discouraging comments repeatedly. Also consider a situation in which the tutor feels like repeating a comment: or a more or less similar remark at half a dozen places in the assignment-responses or may be on a particular page. Instead of wasting his time in writing such remarks repeatedly, he/she may write the comment once and use one particular symbol which denotes such a comment at all six places. This method may have significant psychopedagogical advantages. In such a situation one could use numbers, Greek letters or any other set of symbols. This suggestion notwithstanding, it is worth spending time in repeatedly writing down comments for greater effect. For, repetition of such comments reinforces the achievements of and ensures greater involvement from the learners (Koul, B.N., ES-313:2006). By using these symbols tutors can save their time for not repeating the same comments further repeatedly.

2.4.5 Negative (NE) Comments

These comments should be taken positively by the learners and work on their shortcomings to improve further in their teaching learning activities. These comments are written by the tutor when learners fail

to answer the questions as expected. Sometimes learners' explanation or illustrations on the assignment questions are found irrelevant and out of context. In these cases, tutor guides the learners to improve on their answers. These sort of comments help learners to get exposed to the danger of their mislearning. Whenever possible, references should be made to the unit(s), section number where the content and analysis are available. In these cases, tutor has to explain why a particular answer is not correct and might have to supply brief answers, examples to support his/her stand.

For Negative Comments Sl. No. see 21 of page 28.

Check Your Progress 2

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

Give two examples of negative comments.

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2.4.6 Positive (PE) Comments

These comments appreciate learners' writings as well as understanding of the content. They also guide the learners for further improvement. In this case, tutor has to write good, excellent comments on the assignment-responses. By doing so, it is possible to retain learners' interest in their studies and create their confidence in their writing abilities and study habits. It is so unfortunate that a few tutors never think of the importance of these types of comments. But it is important to mention that it gives strength to the learners to continue their learning activities in their academic endeavour. To see the positive comments refer to 25 of page 29.

2.4.7 Constructive (CE) Comments

The nature of constructive comments is such that the tutor does not negate what learners have written on their assignment-responses, but certainly does not approve of their answers as the final and best answers. In such cases, tutor gives his/her constructive comments to encourage the learners to improve their writings and presentation styles. So, they get to know that there are points where they can do better. These types of comments are basically the mixture of positive and negative comments in a mild form and establish effective, purposeful didactic communication between learners and tutor. Refer to the comment no. 26 of page 29 for Constructive Comments.

2.4.8 Global (GL) Comments

All the marginal comments written by the tutor in a precise form with all inputs are regarded as global comments. In a global comment a tutor is supposed to cover all the comments of assignment responses in reference to various aspects of the answer. Such comments appear on the front page of the evaluation script running parallel to the grade

given to the learners. This type of comments explain the grade and guide learners for improvement in their learning activities. When learners receive the feedback on their evaluated assignment-responses they will first see the grade and read the reasons for their grade. Hence, on the basis of the comments they will be able to improve their assignment-responses in future.

2.4.9 Personal (PL) Comments

Personal comments are those comments which reduce the feeling of isolation among the learners. The personal comments break down their isolation and retain them in their study activities. Though it is a teaching type comment, it gives personal feeling to the learners. They can feel that the teacher is always with them and guiding them in each and every step of their life progression. To write such comments and fill the distance between teachers and learners through communication, a tutor must possess a few qualities. These are:

- a) He/she must have high degree of patience
- b) He/she should give personal comments in appropriate places
- c) He/she should have a certain degree of linguistic command to successfully blend academic comments, instructions, and information into an intimate whole.

A tutor can write as many personal comments as possible but a single well placed and appropriate words based sentence in comment form, may convey the whole meaning, and it even helps learners to carry forward with their studies in academic endeavour. Find examples of personal comments stated below.

“Try to maintain neat and clean answer scripts which create good impressions about you.”

“Your answer is quite good. In fact I could not have thought of a better answer myself....”

An example of global comment with details is placed below for your clarity and understanding.

ASSESSMENT SHEET

COURSE: MDE-313

GRADE: A

STUDENT'S NAME :

STUDENT'S NUMBER:

This is a very thoughtful and perceptive essay. You have lucidly and systematically set out the essential points and you have conveyed the spirit and the practice of the 'motion' approach very effectively.

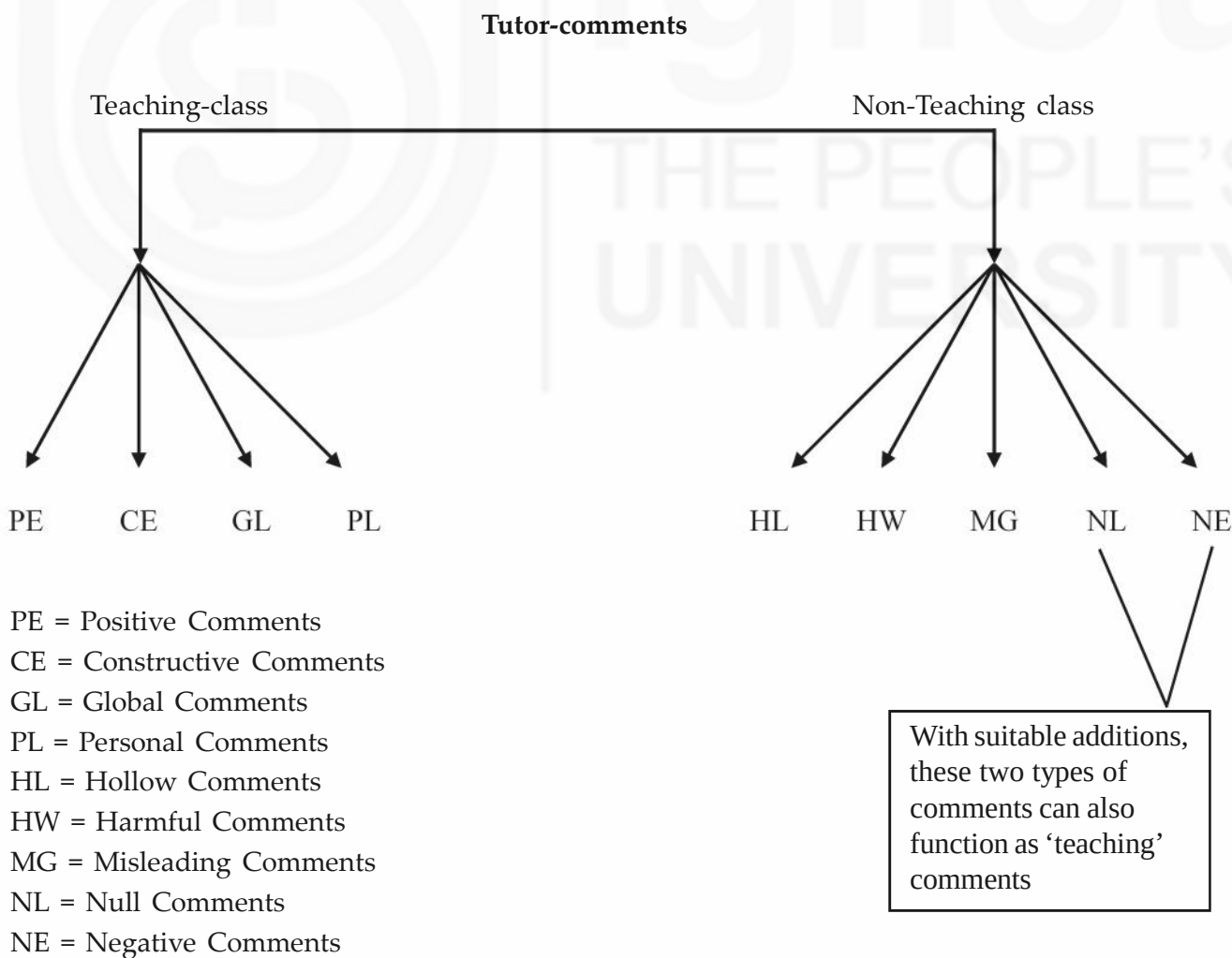
You of course, should correctly refer to the cost of apparatus. I think one needs to think in terms of gradual acquisition, perhaps with a rota system of work. The basic principles can to some extent be applied with an imaginative approach even if the school is not fully expressed.

Content					Structure and Presentation					Tutor Comments	
Accurate Information	☒	☐	☐	☐	Inaccurate Information	Well Planned	☒	☐	☐	☐	Inadequately Planned
Accurate Coverage	☒	☐	☐	☐	Inaccurate Coverage	Concise	☒	☐	☐	☐	Too long or Too short
Good Conceptual Analysis	☒	☐	☐	☐	Poor Conceptual Analysis	Clearly Expressed	☒	☐	☐	☐	Not Clearly Expressed

'Your answer is good. I suggest you to maintain the same writing style; you can improve in your career.'

Out of nine types of tutor-comments, the first five may be said to belong to the 'non-teaching' class and the remaining to the 'teaching-class'. The terms 'teaching' and 'non-teaching' are self-explanatory. So, no need to elaborate further on these terms. But it needs to be noted that 'null' and 'negative' comments which belong to non-teaching class can be replaced under 'teaching classes' with additional instructive notes.

See the diagram of tutor comments.



2.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed the general functions of a classroom teacher vis-à-vis a distance tutor. We have also described the significance and types of tutor-comments. While explaining the tutor comments, we highlighted three types of communications: academic, personal, and supplemental. Further, we have explained the nine types of tutor comments with suitable examples. These are categorized under two heads: Teaching (PE, CE, GL, and PL) and Non-teaching (HL, HW, ML, NL, and NE).

2.6 REFERENCE AND FURTHER READINGS

Rowntree, D. (1987). *Assessing Students: How Shall We Know Them?*, London: Kogan Page.

Roberts, D. (1996). *Feedback on Assignments*. Distance Education, 17(1), 95-116.

Thorpe, M. (2000). *Encouraging Students to Reflect as Part of the Assignment Process*. Active Learning in Higher Education, 1(1), 79-92.

Koul, B.N. (1976). *Tutor-Comments in Correspondence Education*. CIEFL Newsletter, 2-18.

2.7 FEEDBACK TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

Check Your Progress 1

In the level of academic communication, the possible activities of a distance tutor are presented in the following lines.

- a) Read the assignment-responses without missing lines or passages.
- b) Write comments on assignment-responses by identifying the particular issues/points.
- c) Evaluate the assignment-responses by grading/markings as they deserve.
- d) Correct the learner and offer guidance where he/she may have gone wrong.
- e) Elaborate on what he/she may have attempted summarily.
- f) Point out and confirm the acceptable aspects of his/her responses.
- g) Assess the level of his/her achievements and explain the basis of that assessment so as to ensure better learner performance in the future.

Examples of negative comments are as follows:

- a) You have failed to give an appropriate example of the question asked.
- b) You don't have clarity in your understanding while writing assignment-responses.

These sort of comments demoralise and arouse disinterest in learners' mind which may stand as barrier to carry forward their learning activities. Hence, these should be avoided intentionally and purposefully.



UNIT 3 TUTORING THROUGH CORRESPONDENCE

Structure

- 3.0 Introduction
- 3.1 Learning Outcomes
- 3.2 Distance Teaching: Tasks and Problems
 - 3.2.1 Tasks of a Distance Teacher
 - 3.2.2 Challenges Faced in Distance Teaching
- 3.3 Teaching through Distance as 'Two-way Communication'
 - 3.3.1 Problem of Motivation
 - 3.3.2 Problem of Isolation
 - 3.3.3 Problem of Study-Skills
 - 3.3.4 Summative Comments
- 3.4 Distance Teaching
 - 3.4.1 Distance Teaching – a Four Step Process
 - 3.4.2 Assessor's Ideal Response
 - 3.4.3 Assessor's Comments
 - 3.4.4 Improved Didactic Communication
- 3.5 Teaching through Technological Medium
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 References and Further Readings
- 3.8 Feedback to Check Your Progress Questions

3.0 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 2, we gave you an account of the types and levels of communication that take place between a distance teacher and a distance learner. We also suggested the parallels and contrasts which exist between the functions of the conventional teacher and those of the distance teachers. Besides, we suggested why comments need to be written on assignment responses and how to make the comments purposeful. This information, though valuable in itself, is not enough. In order to benefit from it at the operational level, we need to know about the difficulties and the impediments we may face in putting into practice such information and also the means for resolving those difficulties/impediments.

To achieve this aim we shall be guided by a few experiments and the conclusions drawn from them. The advantage in doing so is that we will be able to present some supporting evidence for whatever difficulties we may identify and also for whatever solutions we may suggest. Consequent upon which, we hope, you will be convinced that such difficulties really do exist, and that they can be resolved, the realization of which is immensely significant for successful **distance teaching**.

3.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

In this unit we intend to:

- Inform you about some **fallacies** which continue to stand in the way of the successful functioning of distance education programmes;
- Identify the significant **biases** which stand in the way of successful two-way communication between distance learners and distance teachers, and
- Suggest means for overcoming these **fallacies and biases**.

After having studied and worked through the unit, we expect you to:

- Identify the sources/causes of the fallacies mentioned above;
- Identify and explain the biases we have talked about; and
- Eradicate these drawbacks (fallacies and biases) to render the much needed pedagogically purposeful two-way communication.

At the operational level you should comment on assignment responses with the understanding and care which they deserve, and thus make your communication with the learners successful, i.e. you should be able to teach from a distance successfully.

3.2 DISTANCE TEACHING: TASKS AND PROBLEMS

In Unit 2 we did suggest that **distance teaching** consists mainly of the academically useful conversation between the distance learner and the distance teacher ('mediated didactic conversation' in Holmberg's words), and that the basis of this conversation is in the assignment-responses written by the former. What are the tasks involved in building this conversation? What are the problems in performing these tasks? Let us look into these issues in the sections that follow.

3.2.1 Tasks of a Distance Teacher

Think of this situation: a distance teacher has received an assignment response on the basis of which he/she is to build his/her conversation with the distance learner who has sent it. What is the distance teacher expected to do?

- i) Compensate for the weaknesses of the units/lessons and the assignment;
- ii) Break the 'isolation' of the distance learner (see Unit 2);
- iii) Sustain the distance learner's motivation;
- iv) Evaluate and grade the assignment response;
- v) Help the distance learner in improving and advancing his/her learning through purposeful comments; and
- vi) Answer the questions raised by the distance learner.

These six tasks put together constitute the process of distance teaching. Let us call them the major tasks. Seemingly simple operations, these tasks require reasonable effort. Experience and experiment has shown that to perform these tasks effectively a distance teacher needs to fulfil certain prerequisites, some of which are operational in nature and some are psychological. In other words, to perform the task of distance teaching successfully, distance teachers have to perform certain basic tasks (which we may call the minor tasks), and also approach their work with a certain, required state of mind. If they do not perform the minor tasks, they can't perform the major tasks successfully, and if they do not also approach their work with the required state of mind, they can't be considered successful distance teachers and hence rendering learning through distance ineffective.

3.2.2 Challenges Faced in Distance Teaching

What are the minor tasks which we mentioned above? And what is the required state of mind? These two questions probably come to your mind now. Let us discuss these issues in detail.

The best that we can expect from an academic (employed by a distance teaching institution) is having specialization or expertise in particular subjects. We can't depend on his/her experience as a classroom teacher, for an equation does not exist in terms of job requirements between conventional and distance teacher. Besides, the academic comes from a particular educational culture, and we expect him/her to function in a very different one, a situation which will inevitably result in difficulties.

In what we have said, we are making two assumptions which define the problems/difficulties which a conventional teacher will face when he/she switches over to distance teaching. Let us put forward this assumption explicitly:

- i) A qualified academic (say, a person with an M.A./M.Sc. in the relevant subject) trained for, or experienced in handling face-to-face teaching and learning situations (i.e. classroom teaching/learning) may not necessarily function as a successful and effective distance teacher. He/she needs certain specific skills to do so.
- ii) Besides acquiring the skills specifically needed for distance teaching, the prospective distance teacher must overcome his/her 'unconscious culturally induced bias'.
- iii) If the prospective distance teacher is made aware of those biases, helped to overcome them, and also given the specific skills needed for his/her new job, he/she is sure to prove successful as a distance teacher.

In assumptions (i) and (ii) above, we have stated the problems which a prospective distance teacher may face, and under assumption (iii) we have suggested a solution. Once these problems are resolved with the help of the suggested solution, the tasks listed in sub-section 3.2.1 can be performed successfully, i.e. the prospective distance teacher will succeed in distance teaching.

To identify these problems, Koul (1981) worked with a group of 58 prospective distance teachers (henceforth called trainees) who were adequately qualified in their subjects of specialization, and also trained

in the techniques of face-to-face teaching. These trainees were made to undergo a thirty hour training programme spread over twenty days. The training programme comprised lectures, reading assignments, take-home assignments, workshop sessions, discussions, preparation of reports and evaluation of course materials and assignments. The programme, as a whole was divided into three phases:

(Pre-teaching tasks—Problems and solutions (Phase 1 presented in this unit).

Teaching tasks—Problems and solutions (Phase 2 discussed partly in this unit as 'Commenting' and in Unit 3 as 'Grading').

Post-teaching tasks—Problems and solutions.

We shall consider these issues as and when required.

3.3 TEACHING THROUGH DISTANCE AS 'TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION'

Usually a conventional teacher assumes that, given his/ her subject expertise and training, he/she can teach through the distance mode with the same quality as in a classroom situation. But is this assumption tenable? Does a distance teacher need to perform any pre-teaching tasks? Is there any specific preparation needed for distance teaching? And if the teacher needs this preparation, to what extent would he/she be willing to undergo it? Let us look for answers to these questions.

3.3.1 Problem of Motivation

The 58 trainees (mentioned above) were told about the relevance of distance education, and the strengths and weaknesses of the 'written word' as a medium of academic communication. This lecture was followed by a workshop session which began with a few instructions. Hence, all of them considered themselves as distance teachers, and whatever tasks were assigned to them, they performed with the role in mind, though their perceptions of what a distance teacher should or should not do in a particular situation was left to their judgments.

In the workshop session they were asked:

- i) To study a teaching unit which was prepared for distance learners; and
- ii) To prepare a brief outline of its contents which could be used to teach in distance to the learners for whom the unit was prepared.

After the reading exercise was over, it was found that only 46% of the trainees showed interest in the exercise by preparing fairly accurate content outlines, 18% showed a half-hearted interest, 20% showed indifference, and 16% showed distrust as they returned blank sheets of paper.

The first step in distance teaching is to study the teaching unit to get acquainted with its actual content(s), its scope, and the depth of treatment. It is not suggested that the distance teacher has to learn the contents, for he/she already is a subject expert. However, he/she must see what the course writers want to achieve through it.

As already mentioned, only 46% of the trainees showed an inclination to perform this initial task.

Check Your Progress 1

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

What is the task of a distance teacher?

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There could be three possible reasons why the trainees may have shown complete or partial disinterest in this exercise. These are:

- i) Had the trainees been informed in explicit terms that they were to read the unit with a view to correcting assignment responses based on the unit, they would have studied it thoroughly.
- ii) As the theme of the unit was familiar (known) to all the trainees, it might not have attracted their attention.
- iii) The trainees had little motivation to do the task, and were thus not favorably inclined even to take the very first step in the process of distance teaching, i.e. to study the teaching unit and prepare a brief content outline.

The first of these views/reasons may be correct, but it does not explain why 46% of the trainees did really show interest in the exercise, though they too had no additional explicit or implicit information about the purpose. So, the first view does not account for the complete data.

The second view/reason too fails to explain the whole data, i.e. if the topic was familiar and therefore, held no attraction for some readers it should have been so for all the respondents.

There seems to be a lot of strength in the third view/reason. It is trainee-centered, unlike the first two reasons, and sees that depending upon the degree of their motivation the trainees either did or did not study the unit properly. Obviously, the problems of motivation or of desirable attitudes are not exclusively learner-centered issues. It is not only the distance learners who face problems caused by the lack of motivation, distance teachers too face them, and they need to overcome them before they can do any good to the distance learners.

However, there could be many other causes for the phenomenon discussed above, some of which we will now discuss.

3.3.2 Problem of Isolation

On being informed that only 46% of them had shown interest in the first exercise, one could see that some of the trainees felt sorry, while others were amused about it. We were now ready for the second workshop session, which started with a lecture about a check-list that

could be used to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the unit/lesson (under consideration) as a self-instructional unit. It was explained that the check-list consists of the following points:

- i) Are there any access (learning aids such as glossaries, self-check exercises, summaries, etc.) built into the unit? If so, are they explicit and effective?
- ii) Have the objectives of the unit been stated?
- iii) Does the content agree with the objectives? If yes, does it maintain a desirable standard?
- iv) Does the structure of the unit conform to the principles of course-design? If yes, does it promise to contribute the maximum possible to the learning process?

It was suggested that the above check-list could be used for an adequate assessment of any course-unit. So, it was used to evaluate the given unit that they were working on. To perform this task, the group of trainees was divided into fifteen smaller groups, with at least three trainees in each group, which was then asked to perform the following three tasks:

- i) Read the same unit more carefully than before;
- ii) Discuss (within the group) the content and the various features of the unit;
- iii) Prepare a report (group-wise) on the strengths and weaknesses of the unit on the basis of the check-list given above.

The exercise was done, and the group reports were submitted. It was interesting to note that in spite of repeated readings of the unit and group discussions within the framework of the check-list provided for the purpose, the assessment of the unit made by various groups did not match with one another on some of its most significant portions. It was a clear indication of the fact that distance teachers (trainees in this case) may be 'isolated' from one another, i.e. they think differently; react and respond to a unit differently. Thus, it is not only the distance learners, but also the distance teachers who have to face the problem of 'isolation'. Of course, the nature of 'isolation' in the two cases must differ.

Obviously, the various groups interpreted the unit and its structure differently in so far as the points of emphasis in the report prepared by them differed quite clearly; and some of the groups were not ready to change their stand even after they were allowed time once again to discuss the issue amongst themselves.

This exercise points to the fact that a distance teacher may take a definite and rigid 'personal' stand about the content, the structure and the purpose of a unit and his/her stand may or may not be in agreement with what is intended by those who prepare the unit.

This 'isolation', as indicated by the disagreements mentioned above is a serious issue. In most of the cases, various distance teachers will be working on the same unit with hundreds of learners. These distance teachers need to interpret the units in nearly the same way, otherwise different messages will go to different groups of learners.

One way to overcome this difficulty is that the structure of the unit be clear, thematic presentation be unambiguous, and that provision be made for giving an adequate orientation to distance teacher wherever necessary. This brings in a strong argument for 'training' distance teachers before they are commissioned for the task of distance teaching.

3.3.3 Problem of Study Skills

From the second workshop described in sub-section 3.3.2 above, we moved on to the third workshop, which in effect, was an extension of the second one.

Now, all the group reports were put together in an open session. The weaknesses of each report were identified and a better understanding of the structure and the content of the unit was developed by moderating the inconsistencies in them, removing internal contradictions, weeding out some baseless remarks, etc. (For example, Group 12 had written that each section of the unit had an adequate range of self-evaluation exercises, Group 3 wrote that the self-evaluation exercises did not cover all the points presented in the unit.) After a long discussion we succeeded in effecting convergence in the course/unit writer's views and the objectives of the unit were used as focal reference points. Consequently, a collectively agreed upon understanding of the structural and thematic components of the unit was accomplished.

During this long discussion, it was realized that at least one of the reasons for divergent views and reports was the difference in the level of study skills which the trainees brought into use to prepare those reports. Some of the trainees did not appear to bother about the details, some appeared to interpret words and phrases too literally, some attached as much importance to essential details as they did to non-essential ones. (An interesting example: One remarked that there was no spelling mistake in the unit, though such mistakes did exist there.)

Obviously, no two people can have exactly the same range of study skills, but if the differences in study skills are going to affect the interpretation of units, something needs to be done to help the prospective distance teachers—which, again, points to the proposal that they need to be trained. Once again, we need to remind ourselves that study skills do not pose problems only for learners, they also pose problems for distance teachers. This however, is not to suggest that conventional teachers do not face these problems. In fact, they face them as well, but we need not go outside the context at this moment.

3.3.4 Summative Comments

In this sub-section we have attempted to identify three common fallacies which we need to take note of. It is commonly believed that distance learners face the problems of motivation, isolation, and lack of study skills. With these acceptances, it is suggested that distance teachers must help learners to overcome these problems. However, it is observed that uninitiated distance teachers themselves face the same problems.

It is therefore, quite possible that an uninitiated distance teacher cannot effectively help a distance learner. It is only a highly motivated

distance teacher who can motivate learners. Only a distance teacher who has overcome his/her own isolation can help distance learners in breaking their isolation. Finally, it is only a distance teacher, with his/her mastery over a variety of study skills can help distance learners in improving their study skills.

These fallacies pertaining to the three factors—motivation, isolation, and study skills have their roots in the ‘unconscious culturally induced biases’ of our society of which the teaching community is a part. Having grown up in the classroom situation and having acquired the education it provides, the conventional teacher unconsciously develops a few biases including the belief that the problems mentioned above are exclusively those of the learners.

One of the ways to break these biases is to get exposed to them as we did in our experimentation with 58 trainees. We attacked these biases by slow degrees while exposing their weaknesses one by one. The trainees had to see and be convinced that:

- i) not all of them would take interest in reading a teaching unit;
- ii) not all of them would assess the quality of the unit accurately;
and
- iii) it needs considerable effort to see the teaching unit from the viewpoint of the course/unit writers.

This attack was reinforced by lectures and discussions arranged in between various workshops. The themes touched upon were:

- social acceptability and academic tenability of distance education;
- socio-economic significance of distance education; and
- the question of ‘equivalence’ with regard to face-to-face education and distance education.

By the end of this first phase of the experiment, the trainees were convinced that in order to interpret a unit from the viewpoint of the course writer, one could not depend exclusively on one’s own knowledge of the stated theme of the unit, that the unit needs to be studied appropriately in terms of its theme as well as structure; and that they do face the problems of motivation, isolation and study-skills, which they need to overcome if they want to function effectively as distance teachers.

Check Your Progress 2

Notes: a) *Space is given below for your answer.*

b) *Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.*

Turn to the last portion of sub-section 3.2.2., and take a look at the first item there under pre-teaching tasks. Now, recall what you have studied so far and write down what these pre-teaching tasks are.

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3.4 DISTANCE TEACHING

In the second phase of the training programme the trainees were made to work on assignment responses pertaining to the unit they had worked through in Phase-I, which we have described in section 3.3 above.

All the 58 trainees were given:

- a) An assignment on the unit which they had studied in Phase-I;
- b) Nine responses to this assignment prepared by nine different distance learners who had studied the unit earlier and worked on the assignment.

Having handed over the copies of the assignment and the nine responses to all the trainees at the same time, we asked them to teach those nine learners in a distance mode, i.e. evaluate the response and write whatever comments they thought appropriate. With this began the actual process of teaching in distance.

3.4.1 Distance Teaching – A Four Step Process

Having studied the teaching unit and assessed its weaknesses and strength, structural as well as thematic, the distance teacher must be able to assess the assignment too, so that he/she may assess the responses in the light of the characteristics both of the corresponding unit and other learners. The process that follows appears to consist of four steps:

- i) The distance teacher must understand (from the point of view of the course writer) what the assignment demands from the learner, and build what may be called the 'Assessor's Ideal Response' (AIR, for short) to the problem posed in the assignment. AIR is essentially a hypothetical answer, for the distance teacher is not expected to write it down, though in subjects like Mathematics or Physics this can also be the real answer. An assignment response which matches the AIR (of the concerned assessor, i.e. the distance teacher) will be rated high. Thus, AIR serves as a measure for the assessment of the various responses the distance teacher receives.
- ii) Having decided on the AIR, the distance teacher must be able to discover such weaknesses in the responses as might be traced back to the weaknesses/defects of the assignment and/or the teaching unit. This ability on the part of the distance teacher is of great pedagogic significance. If the distance teacher is carried away by his/her own AIR, irrespective of the weaknesses of the assignment and the teaching unit, his/her assessment of the response is likely to be biased and most probably the comments made will be lopsided.
- iii) Thirdly, the distance teacher has to consider the organization aspects of the responses. Here, s/he must take into account how the response has begun, what the middle is like, and how effective the ending is. Considerations like the logical development of the response, the language used its correctness and clarity—the presentation of arguments etc. come under the organizational aspects of the response. Here, again, the distance teacher will

depend on his/her AIR. However, it is possible for a distance teacher to be carried away by the language and style of a response despite poor or even irrelevant content. It is therefore, necessary that fairly precise values are assigned to the various organizational aspects of responses.

- iv) Lastly, the distance teacher must grade the responses and this grade should very clearly be reflected in the comments s/he writes on the response. These comments may have one, more or all of the following functions:
 - a) Keep the distance learner motivated, i.e. on the course;
 - b) Break the walls of 'isolation' which the distance learner is surrounded by; and
 - c) Help the learner improve his/her learning through comments that teach, i.e. the 'teaching type' comments (see unit 2).

Whatever may be the occasion of these comments (whether they are written as comments on responses, as explanation for the grades awarded, as replies to letters or representation), the distance teacher has to direct his/her efforts towards one aim, namely to 'effect teaching successfully'.

Can an uninitiated distance teacher perform these tasks satisfactorily?

3.4.2 Assessor's Ideal Response (AIR)

To answer the above question, we once again turn to the activities of our experimental group of 58 trainees. (To build appropriate links in the argument, please turn to the introductory note under Section 3.4 above.)

The trainees had already gone through the unit thoroughly (see Section 3.3) when they were asked to study the assignment, and prepare notes indicating what each of them thought was the ideal response to the assignment. Only 51 AIRs were collected as 7 of the trainees did not take part in this activity. It is interesting, even in a sense incredible, that only 4 AIRs depicted an accurate understanding of the assignment, while the rest touched upon items which were not dealt with in the unit. You recall that all the trainees had agreed to a common interpretation of the unit (see Section 3.3) yet when it came to the preparation of the AIRs they ignored this consensus. Most probably in an attempt to prepare a good answer/response, most trainees depended on their own knowledge of the subject matter while formulating their AIRs. It appeared as if bits of the teaching unit and the assignment and the focus became 'invisible to them' and were lost by many of them.

This phenomenon brings to light yet another aspect of 'Unconscious Culturally Induced Bias' (UCIB, for short) — it is quite likely that while assessing the assignment responses, the uninitiated distance teachers will look at the assignment in terms of their own subject expertise, rather than what is available and/or intended in the unit/lesson concerned. Such a bias must affect both the process of distance teaching (in the sense of making purposeful comments), and the process of assignment (in the sense of grading the responses). Let us stop for a moment and think of ways to solve this problem.

Check Your Progress 3

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

Do suggest a way or two which may help a distance teacher overcome the difficulties in preparing his/her ideal response for an assignment.

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One answer to this question is that the course-writer prepares an outline of the ideal response and sends it to the distance teacher to guide him/her in assessing the responses.

Another way is that the distance teacher is oriented towards using the unit concerned along with the corresponding assignment to build an ideal response. Whatever may be the case, the distance teacher should not start assessing responses, before s/he conceives the ideal answer—not necessarily in writing—for otherwise the assessment is bound to be faulty.

3.4.3 Assessor's Comments

Please turn to the last sentence in Sub-section 3.4.1. It is a question, to which we replied only partially in Sub-section 3.4.2. Now, we shall present another part of the answer.

After the trainees had finished writing their AIRs, they were asked to assess and write comments on the first three of the nine responses.

This exercise was given ample time and was attended by only 50 trainees. Of these fifty, eight did not write any comments at all. Data on the nature of the comments is presented in the table below:

Table 3.1: Comments by Uninitiated Distance Teacher – a Profile

Response Nos.	Details of the Comment – types given					
	Non-Teaching Type			Teaching Type		
	No Comments	Hollow	Negative	Positive	Constructive	Total
1	13	20	10	6	1	50
2	8	23	65	0	0	96
3	7	23	45	1	0	76
Total	28	66	120	7	1	222
Percentage	12.6	29.8	54.0	3.2	0.4	100.0

You will notice from the table that out of 222 comments written, 29.8% were hollow comments, 54% were negative comments (the highest

among all), and only 3.6% were teaching type comments (3.2% positive and 0.4% constructive multiplier types). Of these we picked up 87 non-teaching type comments to analyze the variations in the focus of the comments. Thirty comments of the negative type (432 words) attacked the content of the responses, 23 negative comments (160 words) focused on errors in the language used, and one negative comment (54 words) attacked the organization of the response and 6 comments (41 words) were quite rude.

It is true that the comments on the content, the language used and the organization of the responses presented are desirable, as they are pedagogically relevant, but unless they are desirable and constructive, they turn out to be of the non-teaching type and serve no real purpose at all. Some distance teaching may have taken place at this stage, but it is clear that such teaching was not effected consciously. In any real distance teaching situation, the teacher would have gone for global type comments, which does not happen here.

What could be the causes of this phenomenon?

In the first place, we believe that if an 'assessor's ideal response' is defective, as was the case with many of them in this experiment (see Sub-section 3.4.2 for details), the comments are bound to be off the point. Secondly, an uninitiated distance teacher, because of his 'unconscious culturally induced bias' handles assignment responses the way he/she would mark an exercise book or an examination answer-book. In the former case, s/he marks the mistakes to be looked into by the learner and, if possible discuss them; in the later case s/he puts dashes and crosses here and there and then puts the marks or a grade at the top of the response. In either case there is no room for any kind of comment, not to speak of teaching type comments. The writing of comments in such case is a rare phenomenon. Thirdly, once again because of his/her 'unconscious culturally induced bias' the uninitiated distance teacher feels most concerned with the content of a response, and feels satisfied if s/he marks his/her disagreement or disapproval. That s/he has to write teaching type and global comments does not appear to him/her to have any importance.

However, to draw the above conclusions after just one trial may not be reasonable. Accordingly, we asked the trainees to take up another set of three assignment responses (i.e., Nos. 4, 5 and 6) for assessment and write comments on them.

3.4.4 Improved Didactic Communication

Before the trainees started their second exercise, i.e. writing comments on assignment responses 4, 5, and 6, they were instructed, as a rule, to:

- i) write comments and
- ii) try not to write harmful comments.

The results of this exercise are given below:

Table 3.2: Comments on the Second Set of Responses – A Profile

No. of Trainees who took part in the exercise	No. of Hollow Comments	No. of Negative Comments	No. of Positive Comments	No. of Constructive Comments	Total No. of Comments
48	52	128	17	11	228
—	25.0%	61.5%	8.2%	5.3%	100%

A comparison between Tables 3.1 and 3.2 shows that there was no appreciable difference between the two attempts as far as the profile of the comments was concerned, except that no harmful comments were written this time. Moreover, each one of the trainees wrote comments unlike in the first attempt when eight trainees didn't write any comments at all.

This second exercise in writing comments was followed by a series of lectures and seminars covering topics like tutor-comments (Non-Teaching and Teaching type comments), the pedagogic and psychological purpose of such comments, the significance of two-way purposeful communication and the main role of a distance teacher-writing comments to help the distance learner improve his/her performance.

These activities were followed by the third exercise of making written comments using assignment responses 7, 8 and 9. The results were as follows:

Table 3.3: Comments on the Third Set of Responses—A Profile

No. of trainees who took part in the exercise	No. of hollow comments	No. of negative comments	No. of positive comments	No. of constructive comments	No. of global comments	Total No. of comments
45*	58	92	27	23	28	228
—	25.4%	40.4%	11.8%	10.1%	12.3%	100%

(* In this third exercise three trainees did not participate, and so the number of trainees was reduced from 48 to 45.)

Check Your Progress 4

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

Compare the results shown in Tables 3.2 and 3.3 and write down the improvements you notice in the profile of comments.

.....

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.....

We notice that:

- 'Global' comments were written for the first time during the third exercise;
- The percentage of 'teaching type' comments went up by 20.7% (from 13.5% to 34.2%); and
- The percentage of 'negative' comments came down by 21.1% (from 61.5% to 40.4%).

However the percentage of 'hollow' comments recorded marginal rise, showing that it may not be so easy to do away with them. Besides,

even at this stage, no trainee wrote any 'personal level' comments. But more and more experience, we believe, should help the distance teacher overcome these weaknesses.

It is evident that uninitiated distance teachers can't enter into purposeful communication with distance learners straightaway. They might do so, successfully, as they get more and more experience, which may take a long period of time. A trained distance teacher, on the other hand, should be able to function purposefully right from the very beginning of his/her career. In essence, the conventional teacher will have to do away with the 'Unconscious Culturally Induced Biases' (UIBS) to make his/her way as a successful distance teacher.

3.5 TEACHING THROUGH TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIUM

Technological medium offers two kinds of communication, synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous communications are those which occur at a time when at least two individuals are available at their own ends through online mode. But in case of asynchronous communication, an individual can respond to information and/or seek information from others while they are absent at their end. Examples of synchronous communication would be online chatting, virtual counselling sessions, etc. On the other hand, communication through Wiki, White Board, etc. are considered as asynchronous. On many occasions, e-mail communication is also considered as synchronous communication. The commonality among all these communications is that they require technological equipment, such as computer, and internet service. It implies that the Internet and World Wide Web (www) have significant contribution in teaching learning paradigm for the interaction and collaboration among all and between distance teachers and learners. According to Jung et al. (2002) interaction in web based instruction showed that the social interaction group outperformed the other groups, and the collaborative interaction group expressed highest level of satisfaction with their learning process. Thus, teaching through technology includes social, collaborative and academic interaction.

Salmon (2002) says that interactions as e-tivities (task on line) can be organized through both synchronous and asynchronous technologies. Further, she expresses that e-tivities (task on line) are purposeful to motivate and encourage the participants in serious learning. There are a few tools used while tutoring a distance student through technological medium. These are:

- i) Online chat
- ii) Wiki
- iii) E-mail
- iv) Discussion forum
- v) Video conferencing
- vi) White-board

Online Chat

Online chatting is a real time business which facilitates learners to have dialogue with their peer groups and teachers for clarification and/or

understanding of some facts, issues or events. According to Panda and Mishra (2008) online chat may both precede and succeed a Discussion Forum. Chatting can be used effectively as tutorials on one-to-one basis or in a group situation. With the availability of VOIP and SKYPE technologies chats can also be organized using audio and video, and thus participants can organize audio and video conferences in a real-time situation thereby discussing, debating and reflecting on a topic.

Wiki

Augar et al. (2004) say that wikis are excellent tools for collaboration in an online environment. It enthralls the learners to collaborate and work on the content using a standard web browser. It is a platform where a website and a word document integrate. The uniqueness of this platform is that even an individual can edit the content without even knowing the HTML uses. A wiki user can add, delete, and edit the contents as and when he/she desires. Further, when a person edits the previous content, the content is never deleted. It is archived and depending on its necessity it can be retrieved. This facility helps a tutor to track and assess the student's record on their work on wiki contents. Cress and Kimmerle (2008) express that individual learning happens in a wiki due to internal processes of assimilation and accommodation.

E-mail

E-mail, being the priority tool of communication, encapsulates interaction and collaboration among learners and between learners and tutors. DE system encourages e-mail facility to interact with mentor, maintain dialogue among learners. Watt (1995) reported that teaching through electronic mail should be supported by other communication media, and it is useful to send course materials to the participants and do large mailings quickly.

Discussion Forum

Moore and Marra (2005) demonstrate that learners are expected to share experiences, negotiate meanings and construct knowledge within discussion forums. Discussion forum encourages and engages through teaching, cognitive and social presence, reflection in participants for higher order thinking and critical reflection. Owen (1993) writes, "Asynchronous communication is, in my view, essentially reflective and responsive communication...Capturing, or downloading the electronic text for reading off-line, or in printed form, for instance, is something we encourage our students to do so that they may feel free to contribute to whatever ways they find appropriate and at times when they feel it is appropriate as well. I believe this happens best when people have had a chance to reflect on their experience, consider the language they would choose to express their ideas, and compose their ideas to their own satisfaction" (p.141). Sometimes, the participants may be encouraged to initiate, lead, and conclude asynchronous discussion on self-chosen topics. This provides more opportunities for deeper thinking and self-reflection. Discussion forums are generally meant to motivate for self-study, have a group feeling, and provide an opportunity to express one's ideas and views and also to critique those ideas (Panda & Mishra, 2008).

Video Conferencing

The use of full motion video to see and hear two or more persons in two or more locations is referred to as video conferencing. It could

be delivered through two types of technologies: Internet Protocol (IP) based, and Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) based (Acar 2007). It could also be room-based or desktop-based. However, with the growth of Internet and www, the use of desktop IP based video-conferencing has increased in education to provide synchronous visual inputs. Web-based video conference promotes reflection through synchronous communication, narratives, debriefings, one to one and group supervision, etc. It allows partnerships among peers, exchange perspectives and gain understanding in a collaborative manner (Daley et al. 2008). However, video conferencing sessions are often critically dependent on the expertise of the facilitator, who normally retains the control (Hedestig and Kaptelinin 2005). In a study on success factors in video conference mediated instructions, (Selim 2005) concluded that technology reliability, learners' perceived usefulness of the system and learners' benefit in terms of grades, and course work quality improvement are critical to the success of video conference. In a recent study, Stafford and Lindsey (2007) concluded that the Internet enabled video conferences appeal more to socially-oriented students than they do to students with a low social orientation. Fung and Woodruff (2003) after analysing the use of digitized video for professional development of teachers concluded that teacher's professional frames: content (subject matter expert), form (teacher-technician), pedagogy (master teacher), and media (video producer) allow them to look at video from different perspectives. Thus, the use of video conferencing for CPD would be highly useful for promoting social presence, reflection and collaborative learning. Also, it is important to note that costs are lower for IP than Asynchronous Transfer Mode (ATM) based video conferences (Acar 2007).

Whiteboard

The use of electronic whiteboard in conventional classrooms is probably the most significant change in classroom learning in the last decade. But, in spite of increased motivation of teachers and students in the classroom, they seem to have little measurable impact on student achievement (Higgins et al. 2007). On the web, whiteboard is primarily used as an 'add on' to the synchronous video conferences to create virtual classrooms. The use of 'whiteboard' or a 'scratch pad' alongside the synchronous communication system allows all participants to see each other, talk to each other, and permits them to share the whiteboard to draw, write and present prepared materials from multiple sites (Plagemann and Goebel 1999). Thus, it creates a classroom like familiar situation both for the students and the teacher. The visual medium can promote reflection through collaborative interaction, brainstorming sessions and group project work in real-time mode. Using the synchronous whiteboard, instructors in a medical education scenario could spontaneously interact with the students. Oz (2005) says that the use of synchronous broadcast lesson over the Internet is a useful technique for teaching medicine to students residing in remote places. Beaumont-Kerridge (2007) described a system of synchronous conferencing system with whiteboard (Voice Internet Protocol Extended Reach, VIPER as commercial name) and reported the evaluation of the system as more engaging due to visual appeal, interaction and the web-browser capture facility (Panda & Mishra, 2008).

3.6 LET US SUM UP

We identified and discussed a few fallacies pertaining to the notions of motivation, isolation and study skills. We concluded that problems of motivation, isolation or study-skills don't trouble learners only (as is commonly believed), but also the distance teachers who need to overcome them to work effectively.

Secondly, we tried to emphasize that most of the weaknesses of conventional teachers functioning as distance teachers arise from the biases which conventional educational culture forces on them. We identified some of these biases and suggested ways to overcome them.

Finally, we outlined the process of distance teaching, showing what difficulties may arise at different stages of the process, and how those difficulties may be resolved.

If we turn to the list of items in Sub-section 3.2.1 (namely, the tasks of a distance teacher) we notice that we have yet to talk about:

- i) the problems involved in grading; and
- ii) answering the questions raised by the distance learners.

We have already discussed 'grading' in Unit 1 and answering the questions etc. (i.e. Supplemental Communication) in Unit 4 of this block.

3.7 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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3.8 FEEDBACK TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

Check Your Progress 1

The tasks of a distance teacher are as follows:

- i) Compensate for the weaknesses of the units/lessons and the assignment;
- ii) Break the 'isolation' of the distance learner (see unit 2);
- iii) Sustain the distance learner's motivation;
- iv) Evaluate and grade the assignment response;
- v) Help the distance learner in improving and advancing his/her learning through purposeful comments; and
- vi) Answer the questions raised by the distance learner.

Check Your Progress 2

Turn to the last portion of Sub-section 3.2.2., and take a look at the first item there pre-teaching tasks. Now, recall what you have studied so far and write down what these pre-teaching tasks are.

Pre-teaching tasks—Problems and solutions

Check Your Progress 3

Do suggest a way or two which may help a distance teacher overcome the difficulties in preparing his/her ideal response for an assignment.

The distance teacher can overcome the difficulties in preparing his/her ideal response for an assignment by keeping in mind the following points:

- The course-writer may prepare an outline of the ideal response and send it to the distance teacher to guide him/her in assessing the responses.
- The distance teacher is oriented towards using the unit/lesson concerned along with the corresponding assignment to build an ideal response. Whatever may be the case, the distance teacher should not start assessing responses, before he/she conceives the ideal answer.

Check Your Progress 4

Compare the results shown in Tables 3.2 and 3.3 and write down the improvements you notice in the profile of comments.

It was noticed that the 'global' comments were written for the first time during the third exercise and the percentage of 'teaching type' comments went up by 20.7% (from 13.5% to 34.2%); and the percentage of 'negative' comments went down by 21.1% (from 61.5% to 40.4%).

UNIT 4 SUPPLEMENTAL INTERACTION

Structure

- 4.0 Introduction
- 4.1 Learning Outcomes
- 4.2 Discussion on the Biases of a Conventional Teacher: A Justification
- 4.3 Significance of Supplemental Interaction
- 4.4 Supplemental Interaction: Offering Additional Support to Learners
 - 4.4.1 Tasks of a Distance Teacher
 - 4.4.2 Submission Density of Assignment-Responses
 - 4.4.3 Tutorials
- 4.5 Supplemental Interaction through E-mail Tools
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 References and Further Readings
- 4.8 Feedback to Check Your Progress Questions

4.0 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 2 of this block we focused on tutor-comments—the need for them, their functions, and the different types of tutor-comments and how to present them. It was suggested that such comments may satisfy the academic and/or personal needs of the distance learner, and that they constitute the most significant means of building communication between the distance learner and the distance teacher. It was also indicated that for the ‘uninitiated’, it might not be an easy task to write purposeful (teaching type) comments. Of course, some teachers/tutors may write such comments intuitively, but many need to be oriented towards, and informed about the basics of such comments in order to make them successful tools right from the earliest stages of their involvement in distance teaching.

Units 1 and 3 dealt with additional issues pertaining to distance tuition. In this unit, we have focused on the biases which a conventional teacher brings to the job, when called upon to function as a distance teacher. We have discussed these biases from various points of view quite elaborately, as today in most cases it is the conventional teachers who are appointed as distance teachers, and they need to know what biases may hinder their work as well as how and why they hinder their work. Such knowledge/information is likely to help them overcome these biases. Besides, we discussed the question of ‘uniformity’ in evaluating the learners’ work. It should be noted that in most cases, evaluators in large numbers are employed to evaluate ‘assignment-responses’ received from hundreds of distance learners. We tried to show that it may not be possible to achieve absolute uniformity or ‘objectivity’ of assessment in such cases; however, training and practice should help in reducing the degree of divergence which might otherwise be very large.

An additional suggestion was made that a study of such divergences should help the institution in identifying and replacing assessors who are abnormally lenient or strict. Obviously, the issues discussed in Units 1-3 are significant as far as effective distance teaching is concerned. Equally significant are certain other issues which we need to discuss to complete our exposition of the theme of distance tuition with special reference to developing countries. These issues are:

- i) Why did we choose to discuss and look into the biases of a conventional teacher at all or what was the motivation behind bringing in this theme for a discussion? (Note that this issue is an off-shoot of Unit 2 of this block.)
- ii) What are supplemental comments – their relevance and significance?
- iii) What are the other, significant though minor, issues that have direct relevance to efficient pedagogy/andragogy in distance education?

We shall take up these issues in the above order.

4.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

In this unit we aim at justifying our discussion on the biases of a conventional teacher and highlighting the significance of supplemental communication. We have also touched upon issues such as the 'prerequisites' which a distance teacher may expect from his/her teaching more in order to better his/her performance and make his/her teaching more purposeful. Then, we have discussed notions of submission density of assignment-responses, and tutorials.

After working through this unit, you should be able to:

- Analyse the inadequacies of an untrained distance teacher;
- List the reasons for supplemental communication in distance education;
- Identify the 'prerequisites' which a distance teacher needs to teach effectively; and
- Identify the ways in which supplemental communication contributes to effective two way communication in distance education.

4.2 DISCUSSION ON THE BIASES OF A CONVENTIONAL TEACHER: A JUSTIFICATION

In the academic world, distance education is a unique phenomenon, even more so in the developing world. It is not unusual, therefore, for reasonably knowledgeable people to raise a question like "After all, what does it mean by distance education"?

It is no wonder, then, that common school and college teachers too raise such questions. And when called upon to function as distance teachers, they go by the belief that they can function as distance

teachers as effectively as they do in their classrooms, or that their new situations do not make any specific or different types of demands on their new skills and attitudes. We cannot blame these teachers for such notions; as such misconceptions are propagated, wittingly or unwittingly, by the very bodies/institutions which are expected to remove them. We need not, in fact should not, blame teachers in this case. (The point that is being made here is very crucial, as it presents a significant aspect of our current educational environment.) One such institution, for example, in the Indian case is the University Grants Commission. We shall elaborate upon this point.

Most distance education programmes conducted in India are based on the untenable assumption that a teacher brought up on and engaged in face-to-face teaching (let us call him the conventional teacher), is also an effective distance teacher.

The underlying claims in the above statement are:

- i) that the assumption has actually been made and
- ii) that the assumption is untenable.

Now we shall investigate the validity of the above claims and if they are found to be valid, suggest ways to prevent the educational waste that is caused by the above assumption.

Are these claims valid?

To establish the first claim we must engage in a detailed discussion. It is sufficiently proved by the recruitment policy (with regard to the Correspondence Departments or Directorates) which has been in force during the last two decades. It is stated that “the qualifications, designation, mode of appointment and the pay scales of teachers in the correspondence course institutions should be the same as for teachers in the university teaching departments. All the future appointments for the correspondence institutions should be made in the corresponding teaching departments of the university and the incumbents renewed, if necessary”. (UGC Circular No. F, 19-1/74 (ER), Jan, 1981. New Delhi).

Vagueness of UGC guidelines

Now, we shall look at the second claim, which also needs to be discussed in detail. To begin this discussion, we must make a brief mention of some of the relevant guidelines for Correspondence Courses circulated by the University Grants Commission, Government of India.

The two guidelines which are of immediate relevance to us are:

- i) The distance teacher may be called upon to perform the following duties:
 - a) Edit, write, revise and translate lesson;
 - b) Evaluate response sheets carefully and thoroughly, correct them, write detailed comments, explain faults and lapses in unambiguous terms. (To ensure that these duties are performed properly, the Commission suggests that 10% of the response sheets should be sample-checked, and for this purpose, provision has been made for utilizing the services of outside experts); and

- c) Teach at contact-programmes. (It is said that teaching at a contact-programme is different from teaching in a classroom and that it can be done better by the distance teacher because, he/she is familiar with the material provided in the teaching units. Besides, it provides him/her the much needed feedback, he/she understands the distance learner, his/her requirements, and the shortcomings of the course materials).
- ii) In order to make distance education effective, care should be taken to:
 - a) Keep the learner motivated by reducing the time lag between receipt and the return of the response sheets;
 - b) Develop useful rapport with the distance learner to mitigate his/her 'feeling of isolation' (comments on response sheets play a significant role in achieving this objective); and
 - c) Educate the distance learner about the significance of written assignments. (Good responses may be ensured if the awards scored by the distance learners in response sheets are counted in lieu of internal assessment.)

Failure to Differentiate the Distance Teacher from the Conventional Teacher

Even a very superficial study of item (i) (a) shows that a distance teacher may be called upon to perform certain duties which the conventional teacher is not necessarily qualified or trained to perform, though there may be college and university teachers who engage in writing, editing or translating.

Nevertheless, writing a teaching unit for the distance learner is a task entirely different from writing a textbook, a work-book or the like. Items (ii) (a), (b), and (c) imply that the problems of the distance learners, namely, their lack of motivation, sense of isolation, and their possible indifference toward the assignments have been identified, and their adverse effects calculated. Accordingly, certain methodological steps have been suggested to overcome the problems of the distance teachers. However, the corresponding problems of the distance teachers have not been identified, as there is no mention of them in the document under consideration because the job of the distance teacher has not been conceived as an entity different from that of the conventional teacher.

It appears quite reasonable, however, to assert that the distance teacher is faced with the problems of lack of motivation, pangs of isolation, and carelessness toward assignments and/or 'assignment responses', as much as the distance learner is.

Does the distance teacher need to be prepared to overcome these difficulties?

Why sample checking?

In item (i) (b) the tasks of the distance teacher in relation to 'assignment responses' have been explicitly spelled out. However, the provision for 'sample checking' for purposes of ensuring 'proper evaluation' makes it evident that unlike the conventional teacher, the distance teacher needs to be supervised. The conventional teacher may

legitimately be expected to know and perform his/her tasks satisfactorily, for if not specifically trained for his/her tasks, he/she has, at last, observed his/her own teachers performing the said tasks over the years and may follow any of the models he/she knows. The distance teacher, on the other hand, has no models to depend on. And, therefore, it is not without reason that he/she is made to face 'sample-checking'.

Contact programme is different from classroom teaching

Under item i(c), it has been said that teaching at contact-programmes is a task entirely different from the conventional types of classroom teaching and that the choice of the distance teacher, (as against that of the conventional teacher) for this particular purpose finds support in the argument that the distance teacher is familiar with the 'content' of the course. The 'content' of the course, one may counter the argument, is also known to the conventional teacher. Perhaps a better argument in favour of the above choice might be that the distance teacher understands the distance learner better, for he/she is familiar with the difficulties of the latter. But the contact-programme, on the contrary is seen as the occasion when the distance teacher gets an opportunity to understand the distance learner better [see item (i) (c) above]. If this is so, why cannot the conventional teacher do so as well?

Is the 'outside-expert' different from the conventional teacher? Under item (i) (b) it is suggested that 'external experts' should be used for 'sample-checking'. This apparently supports the equation between the distance teacher and the conventional teacher. But when items (i) (b) and (c) are read together the internal contradictions in the document manifest themselves explicitly. Does this 'outside expert' know the 'content', the distance learner, and the drawbacks of the teaching units which a particular distance teacher is working with? Who is he/she, if not a conventional teacher? If he/she is not a conventional teacher, what makes him/her an 'OUTSIDE EXPERT'?

The following two points emerge from the above discussion:

- i) In terms of actual job requirements, an equation between the conventional teacher and the distance teacher just does not exist; and
- ii) The difficulties which the distance teacher has to face on his/her job have not even been recognized, much less identified or dealt with.

Need to change the policies of the Directorates of Correspondence Courses

It should be noted that the 'guidelines' referred to in the above discussion are very old. The argument that the recent 'guidelines' issued by the UGC in this connection may be different and based on better information and knowledge is not only weak but also irrelevant, as most of the Distance Education Directorates (DDI) all over the country have hardly changed their policies and practices. It takes time to bring about socio-educational changes; and if the prestigious institutions themselves fail to rise to the occasion, it is understandable that common citizens (in this case teachers) should continue to be biased, and function according to the untenable assumptions they may have made about themselves and distance education.

To modify these assumptions, we need to be as emphatic as we can – this amply justifies the elaborate discussion above and the one we carried on in Units 1 and 3 of this block. Having thus justified our concern for the biases of the conventional teacher, we established the fact that there are functional differences between a conventional teacher and a distance teacher. We shall now look into one of the many distinctive functions of the latter.

Check Your Progress 1

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

Identify at least three reasons to show that a good conventional teacher need not also necessarily be a good 'distance teacher'.

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4.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF SUPPLEMENTAL INTERACTION

In Unit 2, we did talk about three levels of communication, one of which we said, may be called 'supplemental communication'. Such communication follows primary communication (i.e. academic and/or personal) which appears in the form of tutor comments.

After a distance learner gets his/her evaluated assignment responses back from the institution, he/she feels a need for further explanations – he/she may not agree with the tutor's comments, or assessment, or some other significant point may emerge from those comments. In either case, the learner would continue communicating with and expect replies from the tutors. Such communication may be called 'Supplemental Communication', and it is welcome.

Though there is no way of saying what the theme of such communication might be, it is possible to talk about a few generalities. Diverse disciplines will give rise to diverse questions; differing learner background and abilities, and differing tutor comments will also give rise to different types of supplemental communication. Obviously, one cannot talk about all of them, but we can certainly make a few generalizations which must prove helpful to a prospective distance teacher. We shall, in the main, focus on the generalization pertaining to tutor-attitudes which is of immediate relevance to us.

We have touched upon 'tutor-attitudes' by presenting a few illustrations. Reproduced below are a few letters written by distance learners after they had received their tutor-marked assignments and the corresponding replies sent by the tutors. We have divided them into the following two categories:

- i) The letters (written by distance learners) with their corresponding replies (written by distance teachers); and

- ii) Different replies written by different tutors to one and the same distance learner or similar letters (written by more than one distance learner).

Before we look into these letters we need to make the following observations:

- i) The letters we are reproducing below are actual letters, written by actual distance learners working on an actual course provided by the distance mode of education. And the replies too have been written by actual teachers engaged in distance education. However, all the teachers are of the conventional type (see the use of the term in the previous section), i.e., they were not initiated or oriented into distance teaching, though they were experienced in face-to-face teaching.
- ii) We have not used the actual names of the learners and the teachers. Instead we have used numbers to indicate their identities. However, the language used by all of them has been left unaltered.
- iii) Wherever needed the teachers were provided with the assignment-responses once again to prepare their replies.

Now, here are the letters and their replies. Each letter is immediately followed by its corresponding reply. The letters from the learners are in the normal Roman type face, while the replies sent by the tutors are in *italics*.

Category (I), i.e., Letters 1, 2, and 3 (L1, L2 and L3) with corresponding replies 1, 2, and 3 (R1, R2 and R3).

L1

Dear Sir /Madam,

I happened to see the grades of learner No.3. He scores 'B'. On comprising our grades I feel I deserve 'A', for he has not listed as many points as I have. Besides, he has put in a lot of irrelevant material in his answer. Either he must get a lower grade, say 'C' or 'D' or I must get 'A'.

Could you kindly explain why I should not get 'A'?

Yours sincerely,

Learner No.1

R1

Dear Learner,

I am sorry to say that I could not assess the assignments correctly. What led to the wrong evaluation is still not clear to me. I may tell you that I had gone through every line of your assignment but still the most shocking thing happened unwittingly. It is good that you have come forward with your letter demanding reassessment of the scripts, thereby making a demand for justice. I didn't think at the time that your answer deserves 'A'. However, after reading the scripts, I have assigned 'D' to learner No.2 and 'C' to learner No.3. This must, I suppose, come to you as cold comfort.

Yours sincerely,

sd/-

Dear Sir,

It was interesting to see that all three of us, namely learners No. 1, 2 and 3 have scored a 'B'. I wonder whether you came to know that we are friends, but I should thank you that you have helped to sustain our friendship. But, to tell you the truth, I do not like No. 2's getting what I have got from you. His answer is trash when I compare it with mine. I think only the same grade I, of all three of us, have covered most of the points that you listed in the specimen answer you sent to Mr. X. Don't I deserve better treatment? Perhaps, you should have been given lower grades to Nos. 2 and 3. Kindly review our grades, and try to be fair.

Yours sincerely,

St. No. 1

R2

Dear Mr. St. No. 1,

Thank you very much on your fresh comments on my grading. Though you have stated the principles clearly, your activity on the side of application is not very encouraging.

As far as your friend learner No.2 is concerned, he has paid equal attention to both, statement of principles and application alike. I am not very happy about his language but for which we would deserve grade 'A'.

Then your friend learner No. 3 is also in line with Mr. No. 2. Among the three it is you who seems to be very short. As you know being short is not precise.

I hope you would take a little pain in comparing your answers with learner No.2 and 3 which would help you present better in your next set of assignments. Wishing you an 'A' in future.

I remain,

Yours truly,

Sd/-

L3

Dear Sir,

I had prepared my answer in a great hurry, and I am sure I did not include all the points I should have. However, with your kindness I have scored an 'A'. I am happy and thank you for your kindness. But, I think I should make the following points:

Learner No.2 scores 'B' grade. That throws me off my ground. His answer is entirely irrelevant and his language is horrible. If I were to grade his answers, I would not award anything beyond 'E'. Keeping this in view, the best I deserve is "B" and not 'A'.

How do you react to my views?

Yours sincerely,

St. No. 1

Dear learner No. 1,

I highly appreciate this honest gesture of yours. I have gone through the answers carefully and found your reaction to my grading correct. So I am re-grading your 'A' as 'B' and 'B' as 'E' for the second answer. Thank you for the enlightening note.

Yours sincerely,

Sd/-

Category (II) i.e. Letters 1, 2 and 3 (L1, L2, L3) and the respective replies [R1 (i), R1 (ii); R2 (i), R2 (ii); and R3 (i), R3 (ii)].

L1

Dear Sir,

I know my English is poor but I tried to say all that I wanted to say, and my answer is longest, yet I score E. This is the 5th E I have scored so far. My friend (St. No. 1) has written a short answer only. He has written many points, but they are not all the relevant points. You must give me a higher grade. I very humbly say that, if not me, then my friend must get a lower grade.

Kindly, your majesty, enlighten me about my grades.

Yours sincerely,

St. No. 2

R1 (i)

Dear learner,

I received your letter and came to know that you want to learn about the grade which I have awarded you. Before giving my reasons for awarding grade 'E', let me take your letter into consideration.

You have accepted that your English is poor and the grade awarded to you is your 5th 'E'.

These two things justify my evaluation of your answer script. We aim at language proficiency, correct reading, writing, speaking and listening. But your answer script tells me that you have paid no attention to language which has destroyed the meaning of your script, i.e. what you wanted to say. "Before me, four examiners have awarded you grade E" which again tells of lack of interest to know and learn, what the unit demands of you.

Now your friend has written a short answer and got 'A' while you wrote a long answer and got 'E'. We can talk about many things in a few sentences, if we will be brief, precise and to the point. This is possible only through the best use of language without making a mess of words and phrases uselessly. Your long answer hardly touches few points of real worth and the rest of it is only a 'play with words'. This is why I have awarded you 'E' which means that you need a lot of improvement while your friend has come up to the expectations of the unit.

Language proficiency is LSRW (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Your script demands only two of these i.e., reading and writing. Had you read with comprehension and answered with understanding, you would not have

got 'E'. I hope that you will take note of these things and try to score better grades in next assignment-responses.

Your sincerely,

Sd/-

R1 (ii)

Dear Mr. X,

I wish that your English were half as good as in this letter of yours. You say that your answer is the longest and you please realise that the length has only increased the disgust. You admit that your English is poor, but then choose to be sarcastic in addressing me as 'your 'majesty' and also to cast aspersions by suggesting that I have been unjust in awarding 'A' grade to your friend (St. No.1). I assure you that this is an utterly unfounded notion. After all, it is language, and his language is far more idiomatic and has a far clearer expression.

Even after a second thought, I notice I do not find it possible for me to give you a better grade. You have yourself said that this is the 5th 'E', you have scored so far and I hope that you will manage to be not so consistent in future, by making efforts to improve.

Yours sincerely,

Sd/-

L2

Dear Sir,

I was shocked to see that my friend is scoring A and I only E. My answer is not good, but his answer is not so very good.

I think if he gets A, I must get something as C or D. If I get an E he must not get more than B.

I know my English is weak, but I had written a very long answer. You have not given me anything for my long sentences and long answer.

Could you revise my grade? If not, can you lower learner No. 1's grade.

Please write to me, I am worried about the grades.

Yours sincerely,

St. No. 2

R2 (i)

Dear friend,

In response to your suggestions, I would like to inform you that my assessment was subjective. So you need not worry about it. One reason I can give you is, I read your answer soon after reading a very satisfactory answer, both in matter of content and in language. In the light of the above facts I am glad to award a D grade to you. You know some facts. But improve your English (So I have regarded the 2nd answer better and have given him a C).

You can improve by reading newspapers daily.

Yours sincerely,

Sd/-

Dear Learner

You have raised an objection to my awarding 'A' to your friend and your scoring 'E' only. It is not a matter of writing long sentences and long answer (refer to your letter), but the relevance of the answer. You were supposed to discuss the principles for the selection of text books which you could not do even the least. I awarded you 'E' not only because your English is weak but also because of the irrelevance of your answer in view. You have written whatever struck your mind without meeting any demands of the assignment.

It is because of the expected answer that I awarded 'A' to your friend. His answer is no doubt, very precise and every line in it is up to the mark which you cannot judge. If you could judge it, you would not get 'E'.

Sd/-

Distance teacher

L3

Dear Madam,

I was shocked to see that my friend Learner No. 2 has scored a 'B' grade, and I only 'C'. As far as I can see, his answer is poor; he has not answered as many points as I have. Besides, he displays some kind of love for the irrelevant.

It appears to me that you look for longer answers, irrelevant or relevant does not seem to bother you.

I was shocked that Learner 2 also gets a 'B'. His answer is entirely off the point. I must get a better grade. Could you review your assessment of my answer.

Yours sincerely,

St. No. 1

R3 (i)

Dear Learner No.1,

Very glad to receive your letter.

In this connection I am to state that the answer given by learner No. 2 is not irrelevant as you think of it. He covered many other points in his answer which have not been covered by you. By saying this, I do not mean that your answer is irrelevant. If you think that long answers fetch you good scores you can do so hereafter. But my assessment is based on points, paragraph answers and elaborate answering. The answer given by you has covered some points but I feel that the answer is too short. It is an essay type of question and I expected you to write more on the subject.

As such I think that there is no need to revise the grade already awarded to you. Anyhow you have passed.

Yours sincerely,

Sd/-

Dear Learner No. 1,

I am happy that you come together, which I had, in fact, wished to happen. I am happier still that you have gone through the other answers; that itself is quite a good experience, isn't it?

*Regarding your doubt no. 1, Learner No. 2 has answered the two parts of the assignment whereas you have touched only **three** principles of a good text.*

Doubt No. 2 – your English is alright. But you have still better chances of exhausting all the points. Whereas, Learner No. 2 if encouraged properly, will improve in course of time.

Yours sincerely,

Sd/ -

We shall reflect on the above replies to see what we may learn from them.

CATEGORY 1

Letter 1, Reply 1

The evaluator admits that he was wrong and makes the relevant corrections, but adds the last sentence which betrays the fact that he is annoyed.

Letter 2, Reply 2

This is quite a balanced reply. However, the evaluator displays carelessness in using the expression Mr. No. 2 at one place and St. No.2 at another. Similarly, "You seem to be very short" does not convey what the evaluator wants to say.

Letter 3, Reply 3

This reply is somewhat sudden in nature. The evaluator is either fully convinced of what the learner has written, or does not want to get into an argument. We hope that the former is the case.

CATEGORY II

Letter 1, Replies 1 (i) and (ii)

Notice the difference between the two replies — while the first is explanatory, the second is more like an attack than anything else.

Letter 2, Replies 2 (i) and 2 (ii)

Notice the cause for grading the response wrongly, the reply (i) and the explanatory reply (ii). The last two sentences in the second reply are in bad taste.

A Few Additional Observations

You may notice that the entire correspondence between the learners and the tutor(s) is about the grades awarded. The learners' complain about 'unjust' grading, only after comparing their grades with those of their friends. Their complaints are emotional in nature rather than pedagogical. What is more significant is that the learner believes that

he/she is the best evaluator of his/her own performance (many learners have explicitly stated that grades they should have been awarded with are low).

On the other hand, most replies given by the tutors indicate how conventional they (i.e., the distance teachers) are in reacting to the learners' queries. In some, their tempers flare up. In some others, the idea of the infallibility of the teacher is justified in many different ways. The obvious reason for such reactions from these distance teachers is that they had never really experienced or been prepared for the unique problems of distance teaching/learning.

Check Your Progress 2

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

Compare the Replies given to Letter 3 in Category II. To what extent do they answer the learner's question? What is your opinion of the tone of the 'letter' as well as the 'replies'?

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4.4 SUPPLEMENTAL INTERACTION: OFFERING ADDITIONAL SUPPORT TO LEARNERS

In this section, we shall be talking about issues which appear to be minor but are in fact significant and vital for distance education. However, we have restricted ourselves to mainly the following three issues:

- i) tasks of a distance teacher;
- ii) submission density of assignment responses; and
- iii) tutorials.

We shall take up these issues in the same order as given above.

4.4.1 Tasks of a Distance Teacher

A distance teacher should be able to:

- a) Motivate the distance learner to remain on the course, help him/her start again wherever s/he gets stuck because of some reasons— academic or non-academic;
- b) Provide individualized guidance—each distance learner has to be approached and attended individually;
- c) Provide feedback on learner's performance and also on one's success in the positive transfer and successful application of new learning;

- d) Remove the sense of isolation which the distance learner is bound to suffer from and make him/her feel that s/he is one among many fellow learners, though s/he does not meet them often;
- e) Stimulate independent and original thinking, problem solving and discovering knowledge; and
- f) Help to develop appropriate attitudes towards the course materials, the institute, and one's own needs and activities.

Certain prerequisites help the distance teacher fulfil his/her duties towards the distance learners. What are they?

- Distance teaching systems must find ways and means to enable the distance teachers and the learners to get to know each other, the usual state of anonymity in which the two groups work should be done away with.
- The system should provide for relatively frequent contacts (of course, through correspondence, telephone, etc. if possible), between the distance teachers and the learners. One way of making these contacts frequent is to increase the 'submission density', (we shall discuss this concept in Sub-section 4.4.2).
- Special steps may be taken to introduce 'open' assignments and also permit learners to raise 'questions' to be answered by the distance teachers. Such practices may make the academic exchanges between the distance teacher and the learner more stimulating, facilitate better insights, encourage independence of thought and the discovery of knowledge.

But do distance education institutions make efforts to provide the above mentioned 'prerequisites'?

Very often distance education institutions do not take any steps to promote a purposeful acquaintance between the distance teacher and the learner.

Consequently, the two remain unknown to each other in many cases. If at all any closer contacts are developed, they are the result of an initiative taken by either the learner or the distance teacher. In such situations, at least the distance teacher must take the initiative to make his/her teaching more purposeful. There are distance education institutions in the West (for example in Denmark), where special measures are introduced to make such contacts a real possibility.

4.4.2 Submission Density of Assignment-Responses

Submission Density is a notion that indicates the relationship between the length of a course, be it in terms of pages or study hours, and the number of assignments that are to be worked through by a learner when on the course. For a given course, the larger the number of assignments to be worked through, the higher the "submission density" in that course. For example, if a particular course consists of four study units, each with one assignment, then the submission density is 4. Now, if the same course has eight assignments, the submission density will be 8, and if the course has sixteen assignments, its submission density will be 16.

The obvious point is that the larger the number of assignments to be submitted in a particular course, the larger are the number of occasions

of contact between the learners and the distance teacher, consequent upon which, the chances of the success of learners also are brighter.

There are some research studies which uphold this view, but, then, there are studies which do not support it. However, by and large, the distance learner, the distance institutions, and the distance teachers agree that the two-way communication generated by the work on assignments helps the learners in many ways:

- i) Studies become more stimulating;
- ii) Studies are better organized as the courses get divided appropriately;
- iii) Learners are introduced to each other in the course;
- iv) Learners build a closer acquaintance with the institution;
- v) Learners are corrected where they might have gone wrong;
- vi) Learning is reinforced through encouragement;
- vii) Learning is applied to find out the solution of real and/or hypothetical problems;
- viii) Significant parts of the course become clearly visible; and
- ix) Revision of the course becomes easier.

At this **stage** we would like you to turn to course ES-311, and try to look for links between the views of Holmberg and Baath and the material presented in this block. By identifying the links, it will be easier for you to appreciate the four hypotheses which Holmberg has presented (claiming that whatever evidence is available, they have not been falsified yet).

- The stronger are the characteristics of guided didactic conversation, the better are the learners' feelings of personal relationship between them and the supporting organization.
- The stronger are the learners' feelings that the supporting organisation is interested in making the study matter personally relevant to them, the greater is their personal involvement.
- The stronger are the learners' feelings of personal relations to the supporting organization and of being personally involved with the study matter, the higher is the motivation and the more effective is the learning.
- The more independent, scholarly and experienced are the learners, the less relevant are the characteristics of guided didactic conversation.

4.4.3 Tutorials

More than a century ago (in 1886 to be exact) Harper, the first proponent of correspondence education in the USA, said that "the correspondence teacher must be painstaking, patient, sympathetic and alive... Whatever a dead teacher may accomplish in the classroom, he can do nothing by correspondence... the man who does the work at all, must do it well".

(Harper, 1971).

Similarly, there are thinkers who have differently emphasized the ability to encourage and inspire learners, the ability to visualize/imagine the difficulties and need of the learners, and the ability to like their own work as the attributes of good distance teachers.

To inspire the learners individually, a distance teaching institution naturally arranges for tutorials. A tutorial, among other things, means a period of individual instruction given by a college tutor. This definition implies that:

- i) tutorials pertain to higher education (notice the use of the word 'college'); and
- ii) the objective of a tutorial is to provide 'individual' instruction to the learners.

Whether tutorials should be used only in the area of higher education is a question we are not interested in—we may use tutorials at lower levels of instruction too. What interests us is the second implication, i.e. the purpose of a tutorial is to provide 'individual instruction'. Without going into the details of how and when the system of tutorials came in to being, we need to understand the importance of effective communication between the learner and the teacher. Effective communication is effected by:

- i) allowing more time for individual interaction with the teacher;
- ii) creating a more congenial academic atmosphere in which all types of learners find it convenient to express themselves; and
- iii) providing for close relationships among the learners on one hand and between the learners and the teacher on the other.

The significance of these three processes can be appreciated better, if we look for structural and operational differences between the general academic processes that occur in a classroom and a tutorial. In a classroom situation the teacher addresses himself/herself to a group of 30 to 100 (in certain cases more than 100) learners, whereas a tutorial group may consist of about 10/12 learners. This basic difference between the two structures results in various operational differences between them. These are:

- The classroom teacher addresses himself/herself to a hypothetical average learner. The actual learners may be of much higher and/or lower cognitive abilities than this average learner. In a tutorial, on the other hand, the teacher will have to address himself/herself to each individual learner by making appropriate adjustments with the cognitive abilities of the latter. And the tutors will have to be more tolerant in order to accommodate all types of learner-abilities.
- Classroom teaching, in most cases, ends up as a process that is teacher-centered, (in general, learners remain passive most of the time) unidirectional (overt classroom interaction is neither possible nor usually encouraged), and impersonal (a teacher can not build personal relations with a large number of learners). The teaching and learning process in a tutorial can be learner-centered (if the teacher does not dominate the situation purposely), multi-directional (for every learner is made to contribute to the process) and intimate (as not only does the teacher come closer to learners, the learners also come closer to each other).

- Attitudinal problems which have their roots in learners' and/or teachers' biases, prejudices, inhibitions, idiosyncrasies, physical handicaps, up bringing or behavior, remain unresolved in classroom situations. But tutorial situations smooth out these problems to an appreciable extent.

What is obvious from the above analysis is that a tutorial 'individualizes' learning. On the one hand, it complements what is achieved in an impersonal way in the classroom situation, on the other; it also functions as a corrective operation. In distance education, the purpose of the classroom appears to be served by the study materials sent to the learners, and the purposes of the tutorial get served through the work on assignments. In fact, as each assignment has to be looked into as an individual academic exercise, the didactic conversation between the distance learner and the distance teacher is much more 'individualized' than the live tutorial can be.

Recently, computer-assisted distance tutoring was introduced at various places in the West. Such tutoring consists of the computer processing the answers written by the learners, and then preparing tutorial comments which are computer-printed, and passed on to the learner. Whatever evidence is available today, it appears that computer-comments work better than the traditional tutor comments. (Computers can, thus, lessen the heavy burden on distance teacher, and give them more time to work on 'open' assignments, which is also an advantage for the learners.)

Check Your Progress 3

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

Point out at least two unique positive features in:

- The classroom-tutorial system in conventional education, and
- The two-way communication in distance education.

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4.5 SUPPLEMENTAL INTERACTION THROUGH E-MAIL TOOLS

Supplemental communication is generally provided to the individual learner. It is a personal communication to a learner based on his/her queries on the course and the assignment-responses grades and further learning activities. These tasks may be carried by e-mail tools. This tool as a technological medium has the facilities of synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication. E-mail becomes synchronous when learner in one hand and tutor on the other hand are using the same portal for their communication. This communication sometimes turns into chatting mode. However, to avail this facility both the

parties must have internet facilities. In the case of asynchronous communication, one leaves the message for others and, the respondent is able to open and read this message as and when he/she gets time to open the mail box. And, further communicates to the person who sends message to him/her. Thus, e-mail as one among the other technological tools helps in communicating between tutor and individual learner in supplemental communication.

Table-1 given below helps you to know about the e-mail tools and their various facilities in the context of supplemental communication.

Table-1	
Uses of e-mail tools in Supplemental Communication	
Asynchronous Mode	Synchronous Mode
Deals with complex issues when synchronous meetings cannot be scheduled because of work, family, and other commitments.	- Useful for: - Discussion for some information and clarification on a doubt - Discussion on planned tasks
Students/tutors have more time to reflect because the sender does not expect an immediate answer.	Students/tutors become more committed and motivated because a quick response is expected.
Asynchronous mode allows more time to reply on a query or a complex issue.	Synchronous mode has facilities for instant messaging ideas, chat, and complement with face-to-face meeting.
Student expected to reflect individually on course topics.	Students expected to share
Students expected to share reflections regarding course topics and critically assess their peers' ideas may be asked to participate on online discussions or a discussion board.	- Students expected to share. Students expected to know each other and engage in exchanging ideas, and planning tasks. - Tutor may guide the student on his/her queries by interacting with him/her directly in an online face-to-face platform.

Supplemental communication, as argued by Haythornthwaite (forthcoming), is observed as three types:

- Content related
- Planning related
- Social support

These communications are held between a tutor and an individual learner, essentially to clarify learner's doubts on certain issues pertaining to the learning activities and to give guidance to improve on their study skills. This is equally possible through technological medium also, and most specifically through e-mail tools.

Communication pertaining to the course contents is essential for learning which takes care of the content related issues. Assistance to do the planning tasks on time, especially when learners produce some kind of product, such as, assignment responses, practical lab works addresses the planning related issues. Social support issues deal with social relations among peers which is strongly desirable for mushrooming an atmosphere that fosters collaborative learning.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

As a confirmation of our discussion on the biases of a conventional teacher (see Units 1 & 3), in this unit we discussed:

- The complexities of distance teaching which even the supreme educational bodies such as the University Grants Commission, New Delhi could not visualize at initial stages, mainly because of lack of experience in offering education through a new mode;
- The consequences of forcing conventional teacher to function as distance teachers without examining whether or not they meet the prerequisites essential for distance teaching;
- The urgent need to radically change the policies that have been followed by the Correspondence Course Directorates all over the country; and
- The significance of supplemental communication in distance education, through assignment submission, tutor comments, contact-programmes etc. which can, and must compensate for the absence of regular face-to-face contact in a classroom situation.

4.7 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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4.8 FEEDBACK TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

QUESTIONS

Check You Progress 1

The assumption that a conventional teacher can function successfully as a distance teacher is untenable for the following reasons:

- i) Teaching in a classroom is different from teaching distance learners.
- ii) Writing, editing etc. of distance teaching materials cannot be managed in the same way that classroom lecture notes are prepared and edited.
- iii) Evaluation methods and contact-programmes demand particular skills and approaches from a distance teacher which a conventional teacher need not have.

Check You Progress 2

Reply R3 (i) to Letter 3 does not answer the learner's question at all. It is a **quarrel** with the learner, rather than an explanation to the query.

Reply R3 (ii) answers the question partially. It needs elaboration.

The tone of the letter is obviously rude and disrespectful.

Reply R3 (i) descends to the level of a street **quarrel**.

In reply R3 (ii) the first paragraph is ambiguous. It could be as seen being 'friendly' as well as 'teasing'. The rest of the reply is a matter of fact.

Check You Progress 3

- a)
 - i) Classroom lectures, followed immediately by tutorials help learners to get answers and clarifications for their questions and problems without any delay.
 - ii) Everyday discussions which the learners may have with the teacher and with their peer group give them a deeper understanding of the subject.
- b)
 - i) Self-instructional materials cannot be casual in the way that lecture notes may be.
 - ii) Learners writing their assignment responses, and tutors marking the responses and commenting on them have to do a lot of hard thinking.