
UNIT 1 TUTOR-COMMENTS

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we have attempted to identify the distance tutor, and then to highlight the significance of his/her (written) comments. Having done so, we have touched upon the types of comments and 'commented' on them adequately.

After working through this unit, you will have developed useful insights into the significance and various functions of tutor-comments. Besides, you should be able to:

- distinguish between different levels of 'communication',
- identify various types of tutor-comments, and
- write appropriate comments when you are asked to.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Tutor-comments play a crucial role in most schemes of distance education. The distance learners' face-to-face contact with their tutors being relatively minimal, teaching has to be carried out mainly by means of 'comments' on assignment-responses. To elaborate, unlike a learner at a conventional educational institution, it is usually difficult for a distance education learner to meet the tutor or the teacher just whenever when he/she wants to.

Most of the help which a distance learner gets in terms of academic support is the tutor's comments on his/her assignment-responses. If the tutor is unable to write appropriate didactic comments (i.e., the comments which

effect learning), his/her comments are bound to fail to serve the purpose. Besides, written comments can easily yield to misinterpretation and the consequent confusion is inevitable.

Keeping in mind the difficulty involved in conveying warmth and sympathy on paper, this unit is designed to give you a comprehensive idea of tutor-comments. To serve this purpose, we have outlined the general functions of a classroom teacher and identified the crucial tasks of a distance tutor, which is to *teach effectively through written comment*. (We shall talk more about the conspicuous difference between a classroom teacher and a distance tutor with regard to their comments, in units 2 and 3 of this block).

Of the several so-called drawbacks which distance education suffers from, the most significant one is that it does not allow genuine and concrete academic contact or interaction between the teacher and the taught, and therefore, the system is accused of not **creating teaching/learning** situations and thus of not **causing** teaching/learning. On the contrary, the classroom, it is argued, provides a lively teaching and learning situation in which a human agent, i.e., the teacher, effects learning among the learners.

An attempt at discovering the 'distance-teacher' and the 'preliminaries of his/her teaching techniques' will enable us to react critically to the above argument. You may recall what we said in Section 4.1, Unit 4, Block 1 of this course: the term 'tutor' is being used for one who teaches by correspondence or conducts face to face sessions in the context of distance education.

1.2 DISCOVERING THE DISTANCE TUTOR

An outline of a part of the teaching/learning process in distance education does not seem to account for the role of the distance teacher or the tutor except as an examiner. For, a typical institute of distance education collects information relevant to a particular course of study and shapes it into lessons, prepares the essential reading lists and designs the learning tasks (assignments) or other types of worksheets suitable for its objectives. All these put together take the form of a course-unit. The distance learner is expected to study the course-units and write answers to various questions or perform learning tasks, which are then assessed and graded by the tutor, and subsequently sent back to the learners. The average of grades obtained at the final examination and in internal assessment decide the final grades, and a certificate/diploma/degree is awarded accordingly.

It should not, however, be construed that every course given through the distance mode of education follows the same system of grading. There can be numerous variations, but the basic principle that the final grades be computed on the basis of a learner's performance at the final examination together with the quality of his/her work throughout the period of study is usually followed all over the world.

To reiterate, in this brief outline of a part of the teaching/learning process, we identified the distance tutor as an examiner. Granted that the course-units, assignment-responses, and examinations have their respective counterparts in the form of the chapters of prescribed texts, exercises written by learners and corrected by teachers, and examinations held in the same

way as in the conventional system of classroom teaching, the counterpart of the classroom teacher is not clearly discernible in distance education.

What does a classroom teacher generally do?

To find an answer to the question posed above, we shall look at the following sub-section.

1.2.1 General functions of a classroom teacher

It should be mentioned here that in a classroom situation textbooks alone do not effect learning. The 'information' presented in the textbooks becomes the 'knowledge' of the learner through the active agency of the classroom teacher. He/she is believed to effect the transformation with the help of explanations, demonstrations etc. His/her smiles and scowls too are believed to contribute to this process of transformation — at the two ends of which is the learner, who is said to have been taught, and the classroom teacher, who is said to have taught. The teacher is the 'agent' and the learner the 'affected'. The obvious implication is that teaching is not possible without a teacher.

To further such claims, it is customary to label the teacher an 'inspirer' and a 'holy guide'. However, the usual examination results belie these claims. In the Indian situation we can hardly think of a public examination (matriculation, intermediate, etc.) which does not show a good percentage of failures. If the teaching of the classroom teacher were the only factor responsible for a learner's success, there should be no failures of the kind we just mentioned.

A more important factor, therefore, is the learner himself/herself. This fact is reiterated time and again when we look into newspapers for the results of this or that examination. These results seem to suggest that the question is less of the classroom teacher's instruction than of the learners process of learning. The way he/she learns, his/her capacity for learning, his/her attitudes to learning and other learner-centred factors are much more significant than the mode of learning. What we are trying to suggest is that 'learning' is mainly a 'learner-centred activity', and

- i) a learner should also be able to learn in non-classroom situations;
- ii) the so-called 'inspirer' should, in most cases, be more of a facilitator than anything else; and
- iii) 'word of mouth' need not be the only means of help.

1.2.2 Identifying a distance tutor

The truisms mentioned above [items (i), (ii) & (iii)] outline some of the fundamental notions on which the system of distance education is based. It is in these truisms that we trace the genesis of the distance tutor, who can and should do as much or as well as, and often more than a classroom teacher can.

A classroom teacher helps his/her learners to communicate with written materials presented as bits of information or with material delivered orally or that referred to, to be looked up in libraries, and a distance teacher does

much the same **not** through 'word of mouth' **but** through 'word of hand' — the comments on the assignment-responses. Thus, at the theoretical level there is a semblance between the classroom teacher and his/her counterpart at the distance teaching institution. But this obvious resemblance between them might be obliterated at the level of performance because of the differing operational modes they follow. And this makes all the difference — a teacher who comes to the classroom will, in any case talk, and therefore, by implication, inform, guide, inspire or at least help the learner. On the contrary a distance tutor who works through an assignment-response or a letter may choose not write any comments/replies at all.

The most significant implication of this contrast is that a distance tutor, if he/she is to help the learner, should not rest content with scribbling a grade at the top of an assignment-response. He/she must find ways to communicate with and help the learner respond to the course-units. By not writing any comments on the assignment-responses, in spite of having graded them, he/she ceases to be an effective tutor and exists as a mere examiner who grades/marks an assignment-response and is not called upon to explain his stand.

There is no lack of evidence to establish the fact that *not all* teachers/tutors handle assignment-responses with the attention and devotion expected of them.

What could be the possible reasons for such indifference? They might be as follows:

- i) the teacher/tutor does not like his/her work, and is working under some kind of compulsion;
- ii) he/she does not really read the assignment-response, but grades them to record an overt evidence of having done his/her duty;
- iii) he/she reads the assignment-response but does not have enough time to write his/her comments;
- iv) he/she does not realise how significant his/her comments are from the pedagogic point of view; and
- v) he/she does not know what comments to make and how to put them across.

The problems outlined under (i), (ii) and (iii) have obvious solutions, but those presented under (iv) and (v) deserve to be discussed in detail.

The cases listed under (i), (ii) and (iii) are not hypothetical cases. Often it so happens that academic staff are seconded from the parent departments of conventional universities to the directorates of correspondence or distance education. If a particular teacher is not happy about the secondment, for whatever reasons, he/she tends to be indifferent to work at the directorate [case (i)]. But then he/she must in certain cases, show that he/she is working; for this he/she has to manipulate some kind of a semblance of work being done by him/her [case (ii)]. Neither of these problems has pedagogic solutions, as they are in essence administrative problems. The obvious solution is that 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 and writing comments on an assignment-response.

Turning to the cases listed under item (iii), we feel inclined to be sympathetic with someone who is overworked, and in a situation, that obviously, requires more staff, who should be provided without any hesitation. It is obvious that this third case too is an administrative problem that has to be resolved accordingly.

But, the last two cases, listed under items (iv) and (v) are of a different nature; they belong to the domain of pedagogics. This explains why we intend to study them in greater detail.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF TUTOR-COMMENTS

Most distance learners are new to the distance mode of education. It is, therefore, the duty of a teacher to initiate communication straightaway, and he/she can best initiate it through his/her comments. As such, tutor-comments are of undoubted significance to distance education, as they are both the content and the vehicle of communication which effects learning. So as to effect the gradual initiation of learners into the ways of distance education, the tutor has to be aware of the following three levels of communication:

- i) academic communication;
- ii) personal communication; and
- iii) supplemental communication.

We shall highlight the significance of tutor-comments by discussing these three levels of communication in the order given above.

1.3.1 Academic communication

At the academic level, the function of the distance tutor is to:

- i) read the assignment-response;
- ii) write comments on the answers/responses; and
- iii) evaluate the answers/responses by grading/marketing them.

The tutor's comments are born of the attempt at 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.

Further, to distance teach effectively the tutor must understand each learner. Unlike a classroom teacher who addresses a collective mass of learners, the distance teacher/tutor has to address every learner individually, a major way is to write comments on the assignment-responses. Obviously, this makes

his/her tasks much more difficult and challenging than that of the classroom teacher.

The teacher/tutor must:

- i) correct the learner and offer guidance where he/she may have gone wrong;
- ii) elaborate on what he/she may have attempted summarily;
- iii) point out and confirm the acceptable aspects of his/her responses; and
- iv) assess the level of his/her achievement and explain the basis of that assessment so as to ensure better learner performance in the future.

It is the duty of the tutor to repeat all the above mentioned tasks over and over again with every learner. This certainly is work that demands great attention, as well as patience.

Let us elaborate on this:

The tutor has to be conscious of the fact that the distance learner is 'isolated' from his/her peers and is, in most cases, an adult with several social commitments and domestic responsibilities. Consequently, he/she is more susceptible to anxiety, slackness and frustration, and, therefore, may suffer from one or more of the following handicaps:

- i) Isolation from other learners seems to hang heavy on a distance learner. The feeling that other learners think, work and achieve differently may have a dampening effect on his/her enthusiasm and work.
- ii) Isolation from the tutor breeds discontent and invariably accompanies the feeling that one can impress one's teacher better in a face-to-face learning situation.
- iii) A long time-gap between the points raised by the learner and the corresponding clarifications received may slacken interest and enthusiasm.
- iv) Since in most cases, no two learners can compare their assessed assignment-responses, the scope for healthy competition or peer group interaction is minimal.
- v) The distance learner has to depend mainly on the written word so he/she must be able to exploit it to the maximum for comprehension as well as utilisation.

Since these factors cannot be taken care of in course-units, it is the teacher/tutor who should help the learner to overcome difficulties caused by 'isolation' and make his/her communication — through written comments — academically useful.

Having discussed communication at the academic level, we should also look at the non-academic level of communication. We shall do so, after pausing for a while to work on the following exercise.

Check Your Progress 1

Give at least one reason to show that 'tutor-comments' are academically significant.

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

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1.3.2 Personal communication

An assignment-response is a product of the learner's 'reaction' to the course-unit. It is, therefore, a manifestation of the learner's personality, a fact which the tutor is expected to recognise. Distance learners, by and large, are inclined to hide their weaknesses — they do not like to look small. Then there are others who would like to look bigger than they are. To illustrate the above statement, let us give an example.

"Some of my friends doing your course with me feel that the conceptualisation and verbalisation in your lessons require betterment. I could adduce special illustrations if it were not for lack of time, stationery, stamp expenses and labour.... I request you to prefer honesty to smartness and render your lessons useful!" (Koul, 1976).

Sometimes, a learner spends valuable time and effort in eulogising the tutor, his/her comments or the course-units. Look at the illustration given below.

"I shall continue to remember you as a very clear headed scholar with a deep study of the subject, clarity of expression, keen observation, capacity for right and dispassionate assessment, dedication to work in hand, punctuality and integrity of purpose and intention and also as a man not susceptible to praise or flattery having a calm and unruffled nature, perseverance and assiduity in the performance of assignments entrusted and..." (Koul, 1976).

Such attitudes/feelings might be genuine, but they can prove to be real hurdles in distance education, and may lead the tutor to think that the learner is trying to flatter him/her in order to gain better grades. Further, the root of such attitude may be traced back to the learner's social status, family background, occupation, previous academic achievements, etc. No distance learner can avoid being influenced by the fact that he/she interprets the

course-units in term of personal experience, and answers carry a stamp of consequently, the personality of the learner.

One of the most obvious ways of modifying the learner's approach to 'distance studies' is to influence his/her attitudes towards the tutor, the course-units, the distance teaching institution, and the various learning strategies being used.

Therefore, there has to be a non-academic level of tutor-comment which will dispel the learner's misgivings and mould his/her attitudes to reform his/her concept of the tutor's role, the course-units, the distance institution and the learning strategies used. The tutor will have to find occasions when he/she can come across as the most sincere 'confidant' of the learner, the most dependable exponent of the course, as one who has a comparatively superior understanding of the academic issues at hand, as one whose prime aim is to assist the learner in studying. The tutor's written comments must compensate for personal mannerisms — peculiar gestures, smiles and tilts of the brows, etc. — which accompany modify the teacher's remarks in a classroom situation, so that the tutor-comments may not hamper the motivation of the distance learner. The comments, therefore, will have to be well thought out, deliberate, palatable, precise and pedagogically purposeful.

1.3.3 Supplemental communication

Communication at the academic and personal level gives rise to a third level of communication which may be called the 'supplemental level of communication'. Such communication may emanate either from the learners, or from the teachers. In the former case, a learner might want to question a particular comment written by a teacher, or ask for an explanation regarding a grade awarded or a remark recorded on the assignment-response. In the latter case, the tutor may discover that a particular assignment is difficult, and most learners need help in handling it. In such a situation model answers or such hints as would help learners must be prepared and made available to them.

Having brought in the notion of the 'supplemental level of communication', we need to add a word of caution here and provide further elaboration on this third level of communication in unit 4 of this block.

A word of caution

The system of tutor-comments which has been suggested here is in itself, not foolproof. The most striking weakness in the system, one may point out, is that it depends on the sincerity of the tutor. Therefore, in order to make the system work efficaciously, it is advisable to monitor the work of tutors and remind them from time to time of the standards they are expected to maintain. Such an approach should provide ways and means for learners to comment on the course-units and the work of their tutors. The tutors themselves might come up with constructive suggestions regarding course-units or the system as a whole.

All these possibilities are visualised as healthy steps towards a really effective distance teaching and learning transaction.

Having analysed the two dimensional significance of tutor-comments, and having touched upon the third level of communication, we shall now discuss the most crucial of the problems — **what** comments to make and **how** to write them.

1.4 TYPES OF TUTOR-COMMENTS

In section 1.3, our focus was on the 'why' of tutor-comments. In other words, we tried to suggest why such comments need to be written, and what they are all about. In this section we shall try to show that it is not always possible to write what we call 'well thought out' comments; it is even more difficult to make them precise and pedagogically purposeful. On the basis of a sample of comments written by untrained distance teachers, we shall identify a few general categories of comments which should improve our understanding of the what and how of teacher/tutor-comments. But, before we display a list of comments we would like to raise and answer a question — why have we chosen to discuss the what and how of tutor-comments? There is a lot of literature available on how a teacher should teach a particular subject in a classroom situation. Classroom teaching techniques are an academic discipline in their own right, but not much has been done in evolving techniques of teaching at a distance.

The dispute — whether or not correspondence education really exists and if so, whether the term means the same from one correspondence school to another or even from one course to another of the same school — is quite relevant to distance education too. Though distance education uses as many media as an institute can possibly afford and manage, yet in a multi-media package, the greater bulk of material depends on 'print'.

The fact that most home-study programmes conducted the world over use written course-units as the major channel of transmission, and that it is the only channel in most distance education in our country, warrants a certain degree of sophistication in formalising the 'comment-types'. We hope we have adequately answered the question we raised.

Let us now consider the following extracts which have been selected from comments actually written by untrained distance teachers working on assignment-responses.

- 1 Horrible language! Pay some more attention to your language.
- 2 You have beaten about the bush.
- 3 Try to avoid the jargon if it is not clear to you.
- 4 What do you mean by this? Where is the illustration?
- 5 Is that all there is to say? Do you think you have put in all the relevant information? Read the topic of the assignment again and go back to the teaching unit.
- 6 Please go through the lesson once again and also the question in the assignment.
- 7 Since you almost fulfilled the criteria of effective language teaching materials you have been awarded an 'A' grade.
- 8 You can improve the organisation of your answer.

- 9 You could improve your answer by spending more time on it.
- 10 Please read the question again. It seems you have not fully understood it.
- 11 A lot of unnecessary material has crept in.
- 12 Read the answer again and strike out all the unnecessary details.
- 13 Go through the lesson once again.
- 14 You have some problems with the language about which you need not worry much.
- 15 Your answer is a faithful summary of the lesson.
- 16 You have not followed the question at all.
- 17 Is this necessary here?
- 18 Please read the lesson once again and re-do the assignment.
- 19 Examples and illustrations are okay, but one example could have served the purpose.
- 20 Beginning of the essay is quite good, try to keep up the same level.
- 21 Not clear, not to the point.
- 22 The treatment of the topic is not adequate.
- 23 You have failed to give a single illustration of how...
- 24 You need a bit more clarity in your understanding of the task given.
- 25 Your answer is too brief and incomplete.
- 26 Your argument about situations/themes determining vocabulary is acceptable and the illustration given about cricket is good.
- 27 Instead of giving negative illustrations (i.e. illustrations of what is not wanted) you could have given positive illustrations.
- 28 You could have discussed the issues further with the aid of your illustrations. Besides, you should also have talked about the following points:
i..., ii..., iii..., and iv...
- 29 Please try to test the suggested reforms in your own classroom teaching situation. Prepare illustrations, based on your experience and send them to us for evaluation.
- 30 You will notice that you have overlooked the role of experimentation in the teaching of sciences. You should have touched upon this point to make your answer more convincing.

We have chosen these comments to identify a few comment-types. You must have noticed that these comments are not subject-specific, i.e., these comments do not pertain to any subject in particular. While selecting these comments, care was taken not to include comments on content/discipline, as we want to arrive at broadly applicable generalizations and not be restricted to the subject specific ones.

We will now classify these comments and comment on them.

1.4.1 Harmful (HL) comments

Consider comments 1 to 5. Comments like 'Horrible language...', 'You have beaten about the bush...' are harmful insofar as they put off the learner. Such comments are 'rude' by themselves — they fail to build any purposeful rapport between the distance learner and the distance teacher. Conversely, they build barriers between them and consequently, all possibilities of 'communication' get blocked. Often distance learners who are sensitive feel hurt by such remarks. They not only start hating the tutor concerned, but also become indifferent to the subject dealt with. As a result, they drop out of the course. Others may write back objecting to the 'rude' remarks of the tutor. In most cases, the tutor justifies the remarks, but that does not serve the purpose.

In essence, more often than not, the tutor who uses harmful comments fails to communicate purposefully, and so the interests of the learner are damaged — in certain cases irrevocably.

1.4.2 Hollow (HW) comments

Take a careful look at comments 6 to 15. They are nothing more than words. They read like sentences with meanings, but those meanings are 'hollow', for one cannot make anything out of them. For example, 'please go through the lesson once again and also the question in the assignment' appears to be an instruction, but it is not clear 'what' is going to happen, 'how' and 'with what effect', if the instruction is followed. Or, consider comment 12. If the learner knew which details were 'unnecessary' he/she would not have given them. Nor is 'reading the answer again' going to help in treating those 'unnecessary details'. In effect, the comment is a 'hollow' one — it is a set of words, even a sentence, but it does not convey anything purposeful.

Comments 16 and 17 display the characteristics of both the **harmful** and the **hollow** comments. On the one hand they are 'rude', on the other they do not seem to serve any purpose.

1.4.3 Misleading (MG) comments

Tutors sometimes make comments which put the learner on the wrong track — the learner is asked or made to do something which does not serve any purpose, or is made to build untenable perceptions about himself/herself, his/her method of learning and the environment in which it takes place. For example, let us consider comment 18. The learner is asked to read the lesson once again; in all probability he/she will follow the direction honestly, read the lesson once again, and then re-do the assignment, but since the mistakes, weaknesses in his/her first attempt were, not pointed out, they are likely to be repeated. Just reading the lesson once again or redoing the assignment in itself is not going to make any contribution to the learner's learning; instead he/she will be under the wrong impression that by having done what the tutor asked he/she has gained something quite substantial academically.

So far, we have talked about three types of comments — harmful, hollow and misleading. For obvious reasons, the tutor should take care not to write such comments. We shall see, in Units 2 and 3 of this block that to avoid writing harmful comments is not a difficult task, but it is rather difficult to

do away with 'hollow' and 'misleading' ones. It needs deliberate effort and caution to avoid writing such comments. Our straight-forward suggestion in this connection is that in no circumstances whatsoever should a tutor write any of these three kinds of comment.

1.4.4 Null (NL) comments

These comments which do not confirm or question, illustrate or explain, refute or approve of anything, may be called 'null comments'. These comments include all types of non-verbal remarks — question marks, double question marks, double check marks, underlining, side brackets, etc. These symbols seemingly indicate that the answer has been read by the tutor, but they are not helpful to the learners. They do not decode them and in fact, cannot do so.

Such comments could be made useful by giving every non-verbal symbol a predetermined verbal value known to both the learner and the tutor. In which case such symbols can have reasonable communicative value.

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 more or less similar remarks at half a dozen places in the same assignment-response or on the same page. Instead of wasting his time in writing such remarks repeatedly, he may write the comment once and use one particular symbol which denotes such a comment, at all six places. This method may have significant psycho-pedagogical 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.

The distance tutor, therefore does not necessarily have to resort to symbol a particular **teaching type comment** (see p. 19-20) is to be repeated. By all means the comment may be repeated if required. Of course, the time needed for this purpose must be available to the tutor.

Check Your Progress 2

Look at the sample comments given below.

- i) Since you almost fulfilled the criteria of effective language teaching materials you have been awarded an 'A' grade.
- ii) Please read the lesson once again and redo the assignment.

Sample (i) is a 'hollow' comment and sample (ii) is a 'misleading' comment. Give at least one reason each to justify the terms 'hollow' and 'misleading' for these samples respectively.

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

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

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1.4.5 Negative (NE) comments

Such comments which negate facts, concepts, explanations, illustrations, analyses, elaborations and the relevance of the content of an answer, or the very approach to a particular problem presented by the distance learner in the assignment-response may be termed 'negative comments'. These are, perhaps, the most important of all the comments a tutor has to make, because these are the correctives most needed by the learner, who, when deprived of such guidance gets exposed to the danger of 'mislearning'. These comments may be written in the margin beside the particular fact(s), explanation(s) etc., which are being pointed out as irrelevant and/or wrong. Whenever possible, references should be made to the lesson number, page number and section number where the correct answer might be available. In certain cases, the tutor will have to explain why a particular answer is incorrect; and might have to supply written or prepared answers, illustrations or examples to support his/her stand. (Items 21 to 25 on page 16 are some examples of negative comments.)

1.4.6 Positive (PE) comments

Consider item 26 on page 16. It approves of what the learner has written.

Positive comments approve of the stand taken by the distance learner. They indicate that his/her answer is upto the mark, or excellent, or that in spite of some flaws in the answer, it is original or even brilliant.

It is surprising that most tutors don't even think of such comments. Such comments encourage the distance learner to repeat and better his/her performance, because of the realization that he/she is on the same 'wave length' as the tutor and to repeat the achievement as many times as possible. It is these comments that actually result in and then further mutually advantageous communication between the tutor and the learner. Such comments may be written in the margin beside that portion of the answer to which they are relevant.

1.4.7 Constructive (CE) comments

Items 27 to 30 on page 16 do not negate what the learners have written, nor do they approve of it. Instead, they offer constructive suggestions as to how the answer could have been improved, so we call them 'constructive' comments. They are immensely helpful in effecting purposeful didactic communication. It should be noted that a 'constructive' comment added to a 'negative' or a 'positive' comment enhances the pedagogic utility of the latter. These comments, like the 'negative' and 'positive' ones, may be written on the margins next to the relevant portions of the answer-script.

1.4.8 Global (GL) comments

Having offered the comments at relevant places in the main body of an assignment-response, the tutor must prepare a global comment to cover the entire assignment-response with reference to various aspects of the answer. Such comments will have to be on a separate sheet of paper, or better still on a specially designed table of instructions. They may also refer to such drawbacks as are not necessarily related to the course-unit — spellings, syntax, legibility, etc. Perhaps the most important function of this class of comment is to 'explain the grades'. Every learner is keen on knowing his/her grades. The first thing he/she looks for in the corrected assignment-response is the 'grade', and the reason behind it, whether it is an A or a C. If every assignment-response is returned with a comment on the grades it bears, there is a greater possibility of improved learner performance. *What a 'global' comment should look and read like is illustrated with the help of a sample given on page 21.*

1.4.9 Personal (PL) comments

Personal comments are thought of as a means of undoing the 'isolation' which a distance learner has to suffer from — he/she has no way of assessing his/her performance in relation to that of the others on the course. Breaking this isolation is much more difficult than writing the 'teaching' type of comment.

A distance tutor who intends to build communication with the learners on a personal level needs to have the following extra-academic attributes:

- i) a very high degree of patience;
- ii) a feel for the appropriate placement of personal comments; and
- iii) a certain degree of linguistic sophistication which is required to successfully blend academic comments, instructions and information into an 'intimate' whole.

A distance tutor may write as many personal comments as possible, but we believe that even a single well placed and appropriately worded comment of this kind per assignment-response will go a long way in breaking the isolation of distance learners. Given below are a few examples of such comments:

'Yes, that is what most other learners have been writing about the conventional methods of teaching a language.'

ASSESSMENT

STUDENT'S NAME:

STUDENT'S NUMBER: IND 779

COURSE

UNIT: 6

GRADE: A 80

TUTOR'S COMMENTS

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

You are, of course, correct to 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 equipped.

CONTENT			PRESENTATION																																			
Accurate Information	☒		Well Planned	☒																																		
Inaccurate Information	☐		Inadequately Planned	☐																																		
Comprehensive	☒		Concise	☒																																		
Lacking Content	☐		Clearly Expressed	☒																																		
Logical/Good Conceptual Analysis	☐		Not Clearly Expressed	☐																																		
Illogical/Poor Conceptual Analysis	☐		Weak Grasp of English Structures	☐																																		
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'Your answer is quite upto the mark. In fact I couldn't have thought of a better answer myself...'

'Your answer seems to have an edge over most answers we have received so far. It is so because your approach to the course-units has been flexible and you have tried to think in an unconventional way.'

Check Your Progress 3

We have used some letter symbols to denote each comment-type. Say, in about 5 lines, what these letters stand for.

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

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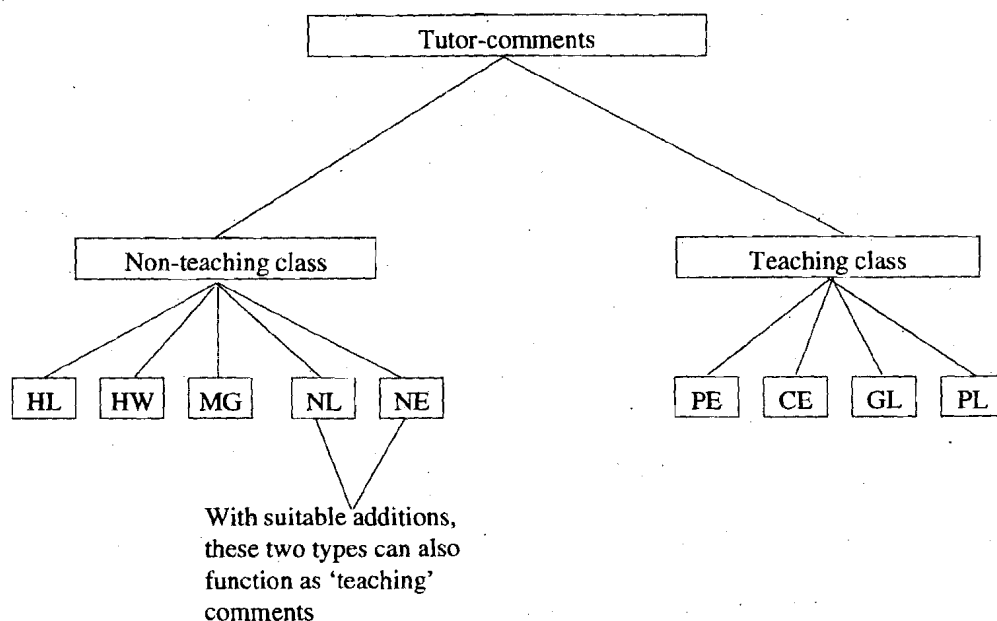
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Of the nine comment types which we have identified above, the first five may be said to belong to the 'non-teaching' class, and the last four to the 'teaching' class of comment. The terms 'non-teaching' and 'teaching' are self-explanatory. We do not intend to elaborate on them. However, it should be noted that 'null' and 'negative' comments, which in their pure form are 'non-teaching' kind or comment in character, can be transformed into the 'teaching' class if additional instructive notes are added to them. (Suggestions regarding how we may effect this transformation have been added under the discussions of respective comment types — see pages 17 to 20.)



1.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have:

- i) described the general functions of a classroom teacher as well as identified the distance tutor (The fact that the latter ceases to be an effective distance tutor, if he/she does not write apt comments on assignment-responses, is highlighted here);
- ii) discussed the significance of tutor-comments and the three levels of 'communication' — academic, personal and supplemental;
- iii) touched upon nine types of tutor-comments and subsequently classified them as teaching (PE, CE, GL and PL) and non-teaching (HL, HW, ML, NL and NE) types of comment.

Check Your Progress: Possible Answers

1. Unlike the classroom teacher who addresses a collective mass of learners, the distance teacher has to address every learner individually — and that too at a distance. To communicate with the learners individually, the teacher mainly depends on his/her comments. Using these comments as a tool the distance teacher guides and corrects the learner where he/she may have gone wrong, points out and confirms the acceptable aspects of the assignment-responses, assesses the level of the learner's academic achievement and explains the basis of that assessment so as to ensure better learner performance in future. Written comments thus help lessen the sense of academic isolation that the learners might otherwise suffer from. More importantly the comments show the learners where they stand academically.
2.
 - i) Superficially, this comment appears to have a definite meaning but it does not serve any academic purpose. A close reading of this comment distinctly reveals that the meaning it suggests is empty/hollow, for one cannot derive anything from it.
 - ii) This comment asks the learner to reread the lesson and do the assignment again. It does not however, explain why the learner is asked to do so. That is to say, the comment does not give the learner an idea of where the answer is weak/inadequate, where he/she has gone wrong, etc. Without having been informed what the weaknesses in his/her first attempt were, the learner will in all probability, repeat the mistakes in the second attempt. By rereading and redoing the assignment, the learner is not going to achieve any academic gains. He/she will be left with the misconception that by having carried out the tutor's instruction, he/she has achieved something quite substantial academically. The learner is thus, obviously misled and subsequent academic disaster is inevitable.
3. The first and the last letters of each comment-type are put together to denote the respective comment-type. For example, 'NL' stands for null comments; 'MG' for misleading comments and so on. [The purpose of this question was to make you look at these terms with greater attention — the final effect should be that of a thorough *revision*.]

UNIT 2 TUTORING THROUGH CORRESPONDENCE

Unit Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Distance Teaching: Tasks and Problems
 - 2.2.1 Tasks of the distance teacher
 - 2.2.2 Difficulties involved in distance teaching
- 2.3 Preparing to Distance-Teach — Two-way Communication
 - 2.3.1 Problem of motivation
 - 2.3.2 Problem of isolation
 - 2.3.3 Problem of study-skills
 - 2.3.4 Summative comments
- 2.4 Distance Teaching-1
 - 2.4.1 Distance teaching — a four-step process
 - 2.4.2 Assessor's ideal response
 - 2.4.3 Assessor's comments
 - 2.4.4 Improved didactic communication
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we intend to:

- i) inform you about some **fallacies** which continue to stand in the way of the successful functioning of distance education programmes;
- ii) identify the significant **biases** which stand in the way of successful two-way communication between distance learners and distance teachers; and
- iii) suggest means for overcoming these **fallacies** and **biases**.

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

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

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 **distance teach** successfully.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 1, 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, which, realization, we believe, is immensely significant for successful **distance teaching**.

2.2 DISTANCE TEACHING: TASKS AND PROBLEMS

In unit 1 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 below.

2.2.1 Tasks for the 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 1);
- 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 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 in the required state of mind, they can't **distance teach** effectively.

2.2.2 Difficulties involved in distance teaching

What are these minor tasks which we mentioned above? And what is the required state of mind?

The best that we can expect from an academic (employed by a distance teaching institution) is specialization or expertise in a particular subject. We can't depend on his/her experience as a classroom teacher, for an equation in terms of job requirements between conventional and distance teachers does not exist. Besides, this 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 these assumptions 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. face-to-face 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 assumption (i) and (ii) above, we have stated the problems which a prospective distance teacher may face, and under assumption (iii) we have suggested the solution. Once these problems are resolved with the help of the suggested solution, the tasks listed in sub-section 2.2.1 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 specialisation, 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:

- i) Pre-teaching tasks — Problems and solutions (phase 1 presented in this unit).
- ii) Teaching tasks — Problems and solutions (phase 2 discussed partly in this unit as 'commenting' and in unit 3 as 'grading').

We shall take up these phases one by one in what follows i.e., Units 2, 3 and 4 of this block.

2.3 PREPARING TO DISTANCE-TEACH — TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

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

2.3.1 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 the instruction that henceforth all of them should consider themselves distance teachers, and that whatever task was assigned to them, should be performed with this role in mind, though their perception of what a distance teacher should or should not do in a particular situation was left to their judgement.

In the workshop session they were asked:

- i) to study a teaching unit which was prepared for actual distance learners; and
- ii) to prepare a brief outline of its contents, which could be used to distance teach 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 disinterest as they returned blank pieces of paper.

The first step in distance teaching is to study the teaching unit to get acquainted with its actual contents, 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 be acquainted with what the unit presents as 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

Why did the remaining 54% of the trainees ignore the exercise?

Note: a) Attempt an answer to the above question, and list your views in the space given below.

b) Do not proceed till you record your views clearly.

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

- 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 may not have attracted their attention.
- iii) The trainees had little motivation to do the task, and were thus not favourably 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 reader, it should have been so for all.

There seems to be a lot of strength in the third view/reason. It is trainee-centred, 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-centred 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 for the distance learner.

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

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 devices (learning aids such as glossaries, self-check exercises, summaries, etc.) built into the unit? If so, are they effective?
- ii) Have the objectives of the unit been stated? If so are they explicitly and clearly stated?
- iii) Does the content agree with the objectives? If it does, does it maintain a desirable standard?
- iv) Does the structure of the unit conform to the principles of course-design? If it does, does it promise to contribute the maximum possible to the learning process?
- v) What is the nature of the presentational features of the unit? Are they pedagogically useful?

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; and
- iii) prepare a report (groupwise) 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 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 assessments of the unit made by various groups did not agree 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 the distance teachers also who have to face the problem of 'isolation'. Of course, the nature of 'isolation' in the two cases must differ (see Unit 1 of this block).

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

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 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 differing 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 teachers wherever necessary. This brings in a strong argument for 'training' distance teachers before they are commissioned for the task of distance teaching.

2.3.3 Problem of study-skills

From the second workshop described in sub-section 2.3.2 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, whereas 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 case of a number of divergent views. At every stage of this discussion, 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 realised 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.

Check Your Progress 2

Turn to section 1.0 (Objectives). We proposed to talk about some 'fallacies' and some 'biases' there, some of which we have already discussed. **List** the 'fallacies' and 'biases' we have talked about. You will experience the benefit of this exercise only if you work on it **before** you move on to sub-section 2.3.4.

Note: Space for your answer is given below.

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2.3.4 Summative comments

In this sub-section we have attempted to identify three common fallacies which we need to take note of (See sub-section 3.3.6 also). It is commonly believed that distance learners face the problems of motivation, isolation and a of lack study-skills. Having accepted this, it is suggested that distance teachers must help distance learners overcome these problems [(see items (ii), (iii) and (v) under sub-section 2.2.1)]. However we little realise 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 his/her learners; it is only a distance teacher who has overcome his/her own isolation who can help break the isolation of a distance learner; and it is only a distance teacher who has mastered a variety of study-skills, who can help distance learners improve 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. And the teaching community is a part of the same society. Having grown up in the classroom situation and having acquired the education, it provides, the conventional teacher unconsciously, i.e., without making any conscious effort for the purpose, develops a few biases. In other words, the culture such a teacher grown up in induces a few biases in him/her — among them the belief that the problems mentioned above are exclusively those of the learners, above them all. Society that the teacher is away from accepts this stand but the institution of distance education cannot. One of the ways to break these biases is to expose them — in our experimentation with 58 trainees, we attacked these biases by slow degrees as we exposed 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 needed 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 the various workshops. The themes touched upon were:

- i) social acceptability and academic tenability of distance education;
- ii) socio-economic significance of distance education; and
- iii) 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 coursewriter, 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 3

Turn to the last portion of sub-section 2.2.2, 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.

- Note:** a) Space is given below for your answers.
b) Compare your answer with the last paragraph of sub-section 2.3.4.

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2.4 DISTANCE TEACHING-1

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 1, which we have described in section 2.3 above.

All the 58 trainees were given:

- i) an assignment on the unit which they had studied in phase 1;
- ii) 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 those of the nine responses to all the trainees at the same time, we asked them to **distance teach** those nine learners, i.e., evaluate the responses and write whatever comments they thought appropriate. With this began the actual process of **distance teaching**.

2.4.1 Distance teaching — A four-step process

Having studied the teaching unit and assessed its weaknesses and strengths, 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 of the learner. 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 of 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 too. 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, for if 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 organisational aspects of the responses. Here, 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 organisational 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 organisational aspects of responses.

- iv) Lastly, the distance teacher must grade the response, and this grade should very clearly be reflected in the comments he/she 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 1).

Whatever may be the occasion of these comments (whether they are written as comments on responses, as explanations for the grades awarded, as replies to letters or representations), 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?

2.4.2 Assessor's ideal response

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 2.4 above.)

The trainees had already gone through the unit thoroughly (see section 2.3) when they were asked to study the assignment, and prepare a note 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 may recall that all the trainees had agreed to a common interpretation of the unit (see section 2.3). 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 those of the assignment became 'invisible to them' and the focus of the assignment was 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 assessment (in the sense of grading the responses). Let us stop for a moment, and think of ways to solve this problem.

Check Your Progress 4

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

Note: Please proceed only after you answer the above question in the space provided below.

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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/lesson concerned alongwith the corresponding assignment to build an **deal response**. Whatever the case the distance teacher should not start assessing responses, before he/she conceives the ideal answer — not necessarily in writing — for otherwise the assessment is bound to be faulty.

2.4.3 Assessor's comments

Please turn to the last sentence in sub-section 2.4.1. It is a question, to which we replied only partially in sub-section 2.4.2. 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 we had given them. (Before you proceed, take a quick look at Unit 1 of this block).

Ample time was given for this exercise, which 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 the presented in the table below:

Table 2.1 : Comments by uninitiated distance teachers — 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 above table that out of 222 comments written, 29.8% were hollow comments, 54% 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 analyse 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 organisation of the response. 6 comments (41 words) were quite rude.

It is true that the comments on content, the language used and the organisation of the responses presented are desirable, as they are pedagogically relevant, but unless they are constructive (see unit 1), 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. If any real distance teaching had been effected, the table would have show a good number of constructive and global type comments, which it does not.

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 2.4.2 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, he/she marks the mistakes to be looked into by the learner and, if possible, discusses them; in the latter case he/she puts dashes and crosses here and there, and then 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** ones. The writing of comments in such cases 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 he/she marks his/her disagreement or disapproval. That he/she 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.

2.4.4 Improved didactic communication

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

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

The results of this exercise are given below:

Table 2.2: 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	208
—	25.0%	61.5%	8.2%	5.3%	100%

A comparison (of Tables 2.1 and 2.2) 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, and that 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 in making written comments using assignment responses 7, 8 and 9. The results were as follows:

Table 2.3: 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 total number of trainees was reduced from 48 to 45.)

Check Your Progress 5

Compare the results shown in Tables 2 and 3 and write down the improvements you notice in the profile of comments.

Note: a) Please do not proceed until you work this exercise out.
b) Write your answer in the space given below:

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We notice that:

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

However, the percentage of 'hollow' comments recorded a 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 teachers to 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' to make his/her way as a successful distance teacher.

2.5 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 by distance teachers who need to overcome them to work effectively.

Secondly, we tried to emphasise 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 2.2.1 (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 shall take up **grading** in unit 3 and **answering the questions** etc. (i.e., Supplemental Communication) in unit 4 of this block.

UNIT 3 ASSESSMENT AND GRADING

Unit Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Distance Teaching-2
- 3.3 Perfect Grading
 - 3.3.1 Assessor's perception of the lesson/unit
 - 3.3.2 Assessor's perception of the assignment
 - 3.3.3 Tendencies towards being lenient and/or strict
 - 3.3.4 Assessor's ideal response
 - 3.3.5 Assessor's attention span
 - 3.3.6 Summative comments
- 3.4 Comments in Relation to Grades
- 3.5 Queries about the Grades/Comments
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up

3.0 OBJECTIVES

We shall continue the description of the experiment which we introduced in unit 2, and report on the five exercise in **grading** which the trainees were involved in. The purpose is to acquaint you with:

- i) how a collectivity of uninitiated distance teachers may grade assignment-responses,
- ii) the problems that a distance teacher may have to face while assessing assignment-responses, and
- iii) what possible solutions we may work on to resolve these problems.

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

- i) avoid the pitfalls one faces while grading an assignment-response, and
- ii) reduce the harm those pitfalls are likely to cause.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Unit 2 has been devoted to identifying some of the crucial tasks of the distance teacher, the difficulties that may arise while performing such tasks, and the possible ways of overcoming these difficulties. In the main, we focused on:

- i) pre-teaching tasks such as studying the lessons/units thoroughly before one starts working on the responses;
- ii) the need for guarding against some of the common fallacies and biases which can stand in the way of effective distance teaching; and
- iii) the teaching task of writing purposeful comments.

In this unit, we shall elaborate on the theme of teaching tasks with our focus on **grading**. In talking about **grading**, you will notice that we have to refer to the issue of comments as well.

In order to make the exposition clear, we shall introduce a few new concepts here and there in our discussion. We shall explain those concepts along with the main text to avoid any unnecessary difficulties.

3.2 DISTANCE TEACHING-2

Whether you consider learners at the primary level, the secondary level, the university level, or those adults who take in-service courses, bright learners or ordinary learners, all of them appear to show immense interest in what their teachers think of their performance.

Invariably, if a learner receives a corrected assignment-response (of whatever type) his/her first reaction is to look for the grade/mark scored. Having taken a look at the grade, one may then look for the remarks which the teacher has written. It is not unusual for a learner to get upset if the grade scored is below his/her expectations, and these expectations are not always well-placed.

In a classroom situation, the teacher concerned explains, in most cases, what may have gone wrong with an answer because of which it scored a low grade, or else, the learners themselves satisfy their curiosity by comparing their performance with those of their peers. Neither of these possibilities is available in the system of distance education. The distance teacher has to provide such possibilities as a matter of routine. How is this done? There appear to be three answers or solutions to this question:

- i) the distance teacher's grading be 'perfect';
- ii) the comments reflect the grades appropriately; and
- iii) the distance teacher explain the grades awarded.

Any combination of these three, we believe, must satisfy the distance learner. Consequently, he/she remains motivated and keeps improving his/her performance. However, it is not an easy task to achieve any of the three solutions suggested above. We shall discuss them one by one.

3.3 PERFECT GRADING

By **perfect** grading we mean flawless grading which implies that a response is awarded the grade which it actually deserves. Even if there be a way of effecting 'perfect' grading, it is very difficult to convince, or even tell, the distance learner that the score is what he/she deserved. Added to this problem are the problems of mass involvement in distance education systems in which a large number of distance teachers are involved in assessing a large number of assignment-responses. To appreciate the dimensions of these problems we take you back to the group of trainees we introduced to you in Unit 2.

Please turn to Unit 2, sub-section 2.4.3. You will find that after the trainees prepared their individual AIRs, they were asked to assess and write comments on the first three of the nine responses which we had given them. In sub-section 2.4.3 we talked about the comments they wrote, now we shall talk about the grades they awarded. See Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Grades awarded in Exercises 1 and 2 — a profile

Response Nos.	Norm	Number of Respondents	Grading (Exercise 1)							Regrading (Exercise 2)						
			Grades awarded on 5 point scale					Range of Dispersion	Dispersion %	Grades awarded on 5 point scale					Range of Dispersion	Dispersion %
			A	B	C	D	E			A	B	C	D	E		
1	B	45	12	28	1	4	—	+ 12 - 9	15.5	4	34	5	2	—	+ 4 - 9	9.6
2	E	45	1	1	4	—	39	+ 15 - 0	8.3	—	2	3	—	40	+ 12 - 0	6.6
3	D	45	1	7	7	4	26	+ 24 - 26	37.0	—	8	4	9	24	+ 20 - 24	32.6

Before we talk about the table, we need to explain a few terms we have used in it.

Norm : 'Norm' is the grade awarded to a response by the best judgement available for the purpose. For the nine responses which we used in this experiment, the NORMS were decided by a panel of four experts. Three of them presented their views on and awards for each of the nine responses, and the fourth, after a consideration of these views and awards decided on the most appropriate grades for the nine responses under consideration. In other words the NORM for a response implies its 'perfect' grade, the grade it actually deserves, or the grade it scores under the best judgement available.

Dispersion : Dispersion is the scattering of grades away from the NORM. For example, let there be a response which deserves a C grade. Its NORM then is C. A particular assessor may award it an A; then, we shall say that in his/her grading there is a dispersion of 2 points above the NORM, i.e., the dispersion is +2. Similarly, if the award made is E instead, then the dispersion is 2 points below the NORM, i.e., — 2. In the former case, we say, the awarded grade is +2 points away from the NORM, and in the latter case it is — 2 points away from the NORM. Accordingly,

- the RANGE OF DISPERSION = Σnd , [where 'n' is the number of grades (or the number of assessors), and 'd' is the distance of 'n' from the NORM], and
- the percentage of DISPERSION = $(\Sigma nd \times 100) \div \text{the maximum possible } \Sigma nd$.

Note : If you are not 'mathematically inclined' you need not bother about the last two notions presented above, till you find them interesting enough to work through.

Now, let us turn to Table 3.1 to see what it depicts. Of the 45 trainees who participated in the exercise, 12 awarded A to response no. 1, 28 awarded it B, 1 awarded it C, and 4 awarded it D. Obviously, most trainees, i.e., 28 of them, identified the NORM. Similarly, in the case of response no. 2 most trainees identified the NORM. But in the case of response no. 3, the grades awarded ranged from A to E on a five point scale, and the NORM was identified by a small number of assessors.

Check Your Progress 1

What inferences do you draw from the above data?

- Note:** a) One does not need to be a trained distance teacher to draw inferences from these data.
b) Please do not proceed till you have answered the above question in the space provided below.

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The range of dispersion in the case of response no. 1 is from +12 to -9 points, i.e., 21 points, for response no. 2 it is 15 points and for response no. 3 it is from +24 to -26 points, i.e., 50 points. It is both interesting and disturbing that the same response is awarded an A by one evaluator, and E or D by another. Imagine a hundred distance teachers assessing the responses of 20,000 distance learners (i.e., at the rate of 200 responses per distance teacher). In such a situation there does not seem to be any certainty that all the responses will be awarded the grades they actually deserve. This is a very disturbing problem which one has to face time and again when responses are given for assessment. Assignments consisting of the objective kind of question will in all probability be marked/assessed by the computer so the problem is one of the tutor-marked assignments. We must pause a moment and ask ourselves — why does such a thing happen?

To answer the above question, we bring in the notion of '**discrimination factors**'. We may define '**discrimination factors**' as the factors, which when favourable, help the distance teacher in discriminating between a weak response and a good one, and between a good one and a better one; and when these factors are not favourable, they affect the teachers judgement adversely. Some of these factors appear to belong to the distance teacher (assessor):

- i) perception of the lesson/unit;
- ii) perception of the assignment;
- iii) a tendency towards being lenient or strict;
- iv) ideal response to an assignment; and
- v) attention span.

One could add to this list. For example, we could say that indifference and absolute carelessness on the part of the assessors can cause dispersion. True, but we are considering only those factors which have pedagogic relevance. Indifferent and absolutely careless people shouldn't have any place in the systems of distance education, indeed, in any other system. Besides, we are looking into factors suggested by our data. We shall discuss these factors one by one.

3.3.1 Assessor's perception of the lesson/unit

We have discussed this issue in detail in Unit 2, where we suggested that 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. In our experiment we had taken care of this factor by making the trainees go through the unit individually, and then in groups making sure that they knew for certain what the unit was intended to achieve. So, in this situation we rule out any dispersion because of this factor.

3.3.2 Assessor's perception of the assignment

You may recall that the exercise on grading was taken up when the trainees had prepared their individual AIRs (see sub-section 2.4.3). At this stage we did not talk about the assignment — its strengths and weaknesses. A faulty perception of the assignment may cause errors in assessment. To overcome this difficulty we have suggested (see sub-section 2.4.2) two ways — (i) guidance from the course writers, and (ii) appropriate orientation for the assessors to help them look through the assignment clearly.

In this particular case we used the second alternative by looking for the weaknesses of the assignment — its language, components or the difficulties it may cause for the learners. Having analysed the assignment and identified its weaknesses/defects (we need not talk about them here), we suggested that assessors could compensate for those defects by treating the responses somewhat leniently, i.e., not punish a learner for errors or faults which may be there in the responses because of defects in the assignment. This was agreed to by all the trainees.

Following this agreement, we started the second exercise in grading — the trainees were asked to **regrade** responses 1, 2 and 3 and grade responses 4, 5 and 6.

The results of **regrading** responses 1, 2 and 3 are indicated in the right hand part of table above (see Table 3.1), and those of **grading** responses 4, 5 and 6 in the left hand part of the table on page 37 (see Table 3.2).

Notice that in the **regrading exercise** (Exercise 2) the dispersion in all the three cases (response nos. 1, 2 and 3) was reduced as shown below (also see Table 3.1).

- i) Response No. 1: Range of dispersion reduced from 21 points to 13 points.
- Response No. 2: Range of dispersion reduced from 15 points to 12 points.
- Response No. 3: Range of dispersion reduced from 50 points to 44 points.

Table 3.2: Grades awarded in Exercises 2 and 3

Response Nos.	Norm	Number of Respondents	Grading (Exercise 2)							Regrading (Exercise 3)						
			Grades awarded on 5 point scale					Range of Dispersion	Dispersion %	Grades awarded on 5 point scale					Range of Dispersion	Dispersion %
			A	B	C	D	E			A	B	C	D	E		
4	C	48	1	16	18	8	5	+ 18 - 18	37.4	—	16	20	10	2	+ 16 - 14	31.2
5	C	48	3	19	12	10	4	+ 25 - 18	44.7	1	17	16	12	2	+ 19 - 16	36.4
6	C	48	12	21	14	—	1	+ 45 - 2	48.9	7	29	11	—	1	+ 43 - 2	46.8

- ii) The proximity movement of grades is towards the NORM in all the three cases, but it is weak in the case of response no. 3.

At this stage, we must explain what we mean by 'proximity movement'.

Proximity movement is a concept that helps in assessing whether or not a particular group of trainees has collectively improved their techniques of assessment of responses. It is independent of the range of dispersion, and is measured (in a repeated exercise) in terms of the number of grades that move toward or away from the NORM. Movement toward the NORM implies an improvement in the collective assessment of the response(s) under consideration.

With the narrowing down of the range of dispersion and proximity movement toward the NORM in all the cases we infer that the quality of assessment improved in the regrading exercise. Thus, we may conclude that a better understanding of the weaknesses of the assignment will result in better assessment in terms of grading a response.

3.3.3 Tendencies towards being lenient and/or strict

Again, take a look at Table 3.1. Notice that there can be assessors who may award an A, B or C for an assignment-response which deserves an E or D; and similarly, there are assessors who may award lower grades, i.e., E or D for a response that deserves higher grades such as A or B.

Table 3.2 also confirms the observations made above, as in the case of responses 4 and 5, assessors awarded grades ranging from A to E for what deserved a C grade.

A superficial inference may be that some assessors can be very lenient and some very strict. But we need to disclose some vital information at this stage.

On the basis of the assessment of responses 1, 2 and 3, we had identified 10 trainees who could be labelled 'lenient' or 'strict' as they had awarded grades quite far away from the NORMS. If being 'lenient' or 'strict' were an absolute attribute of an assessor, he/she should have displayed that attribute in the second exercise as well. But, interestingly, those who showed themselves lenient or strict in assessing responses 1, 2 and 3, did not appear to be so in assessing responses 4, 5 and 6 except in one case.

Obviously, then the notion of being inherently lenient and strict need not worry us as assessors. The broad deviation in grading by these trainees seems to have its base in other factors.

3.3.4 Assessor's ideal response

Having made sure that the trainees studied the unit (see section 2.3) thoroughly, and also the assignment (see sub-section 3.3.2), we now turned to their individual **ideal responses** which we had collected from them earlier (see sub-section 2.4.3). Differences among individual AIRs could be the cause for a dispersion in grades, as every assessor will mentally use his/her AIR as the yardstick for assessing a response. We tried to do away with this 'discrimination factor' in the following way.

We took up all the AIRs for discussion in an open session which was attended by all the trainees. Once again we discussed the assignment, its components, its relative significance and what weight it may have, how the assignment was related to the lesson/unit concerned, and what might be expected from the learners keeping in view the objectives of the lesson/unit, the weaknesses of the assignment and the lesson/unit, and the types of learners taking the course.

In the light of the discussion each trainee made the required changes in his/her AIR. In other words a commonly agreed upon, and, therefore, more valid, AIR was arrived at.

Now the trainees were requested to **regrade** responses 4, 5 and 6, and **grade** responses 7, 8 and 9. The results of this third exercise of regrading responses 4, 5 and 6 are presented partly in the right hand part of Table 3.2 and partly in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3: Grades awarded in Exercise 3

Response Nos.	Norm	Number of Respondents	Grading (Exercise 3)						
			Grades awarded on 5 point scale					Range of Dispersion	Dispersion %
			A	B	C	D	E		
7	B	45	9	26	7	3	—	+ 9 - 13	16.3 - 13
8	D	45	—	4	7	21	13	+ 15 - 13	20.8
9	B	45	2	16	11	12	4	+ 2 - 47	36.3

Let us take a look at Tables 3.2 and 3.3 once again, and study the differences in the pattern of the grades awarded (responses 4, 5 and 6) during the second and the third grading exercises (see sub-section 3.3.2), and those awarded during the third exercise (in the case of responses 7, 8 and 9 in this very sub-section). What do we notice? And what could be the possible inferences?

- Once again, the range of dispersion decreased when the responses were regraded. The inference is that a better understanding of what **the responses should be** does lead to an improvement in the quality of

grading. Accordingly, not only did the dispersion decrease, but the 'proximity movement' was also towards the NORM, except in the case of response no. 6.

- The range of dispersion is broadest in the case of response no. 6. It was so in the case of response no. 3 as well. We shall comment on this phenomenon in the following sub-section.

3.3.5 Assessor's attention span

The three exercises in grading, as indicated above, show yet another interesting result. In all the three cases (see Tables 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3), the range of dispersion is the broadest in the case of the third response, i.e., responses 3, 6 and 9. It might be so because of the assessor's 'attention span', which is one of the possible discrimination factors (see section 3.3). It is worth noting that this factor may be measured in terms of the number of responses an assessor can assess accurately in a single stretch of assessment activity. It does not appear to have any correlation to the period of time spent on the activity.

One possible conclusion is that in this particular group of trainees (assessors in this case), mostly had an 'attention span' of two responses, since they could work with good concentration/attention for the span of just two responses. By the time they took the third response for assessment, their attention became weaker, which resulted in broader ranges of dispersion in all the three exercises.

3.3.6 Summative comments

We notice that grading an assignment-response, which is one of the major tasks of a distance teacher, is quite a complex task, and to achieve 'perfect grading' is almost impossible (See sub-section 2.3.4 also). Discrimination factors will always remain major hurdles for the distance teacher to overcome. Obviously, the most successful distance teacher is the one who consciously controls these factors.

Check Your Progress 2

Suggest ways to control the five discrimination factors which have been discussed in this section.

Note: Please do not proceed before you have written your suggestions in the space provided below.

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It is obvious that the study units have to be studied thoroughly by the distance teacher and s/he must see what their weaknesses and strengths as self-instructional materials are. Secondly, s/he must study the assignment critically to see whether or not it matches the objectives of the study unit, (whether it is too demanding etc.) and compensates for its defects by attitudinal adjustments, i.e., not penalise learners for errors caused by the weaknesses of the assignment itself. Thirdly, the distance teacher needs to decide what s/he may expect from the learners as responses. Such a step will ensure uniformity in his/her assessment of varied responses, and keep him/her closer to the NORM most of the time. Lastly, s/he must find ways to increase his/her 'attention span' — this is possible through constant practice and a deliberate effort at achieving this aim.

However, this study of group grading throws up a serious question which should be of great concern to us.

3.4 COMMENTS IN RELATION TO GRADES

We have discussed **comments** in detail in unit 2, and **grades** in section 3.3. Earlier we suggested that **commenting** and **grading** put together become a dependable means of two-way communication between the distance teacher and the distance learner. Since the objective of both these activities is the same, i.e., effecting distance teaching, the two need to have a strong correlation between them. To appreciate this point we need to go to our data once again, which we present below in a different form.

Notice the following facts from Table 3.4.

- A high percentage of lower grades (54.1%) in relation to a low percentage of teaching type comments (3.6%) indicates that teaching has not taken place, as all those who have scored low grades need a sufficiently large number of teaching type comments.
- A low percentage (3.2%) of positive comments does not go well with a relatively higher percentage (45.9%) of higher grades, as all those who score higher grades should be given positive comments.

The inference is that there is no correlation between the comments written and the grades awarded. Of course, here we are talking about commenting and grading practised in a group exercise, but the same also applies to

Table 3.4: Comment types and grade-types correlated

Comment-Types Give (Table 1)						Grades Awarded					
Non-teaching type			Teaching type		Total	Higher grades			Lower grades		Total
Nil	Hollow	Negative	Positive	Constructive		A	B	C	D	E	
28	66	120	7	1	222	14	36	12	8	65	135
12.6%	29.8%	54.0%	3.2%	0.4%	100%	10.4%	26.6%	8.9%	5.9%	48.2%	100%
96.4%			3.6%		100%	45.9%			54.1%		100%

Now take a look at Table 8 given below:

Comment-Types Given						Grades Awarded					
Non-teaching type			Teaching type		Total	Higher grades			Lower grades		Total
Nil	Hollow	Negative	Positive	Constructive		A	B	C	D	E	
0	52	128	17	11	208	16	56	44	18	10	144
0%	25.0%	61.5%	8.2%	5.3%	100%	11.1%	38.9%	30.5%	12.5%	7.0%	100%
86.5%			13.5%		100%	80.5%			19.5%		100%

Try to see whether the grades awarded and the comments written display any correlation between them. Our answer to the question is that they do display some improvement in the correlation of the kind we have been talking about. But, we would like you to use the space given below to jot down the improvements, in comparison with the data in table 3.4, which are indicated in Table 3.5 above.

[illegible]

Very often, in the initial stages of their orientation, distance teachers show a complete disregard for 'appropriateness'. For example, a grade A is accompanied by exactly the same comment which accompanies a grade C. The comments themselves may be relevant and useful in their places, but

when one looks at them in relation to each other one would expect a grade A and a grade C to be accompanied by different types of comments. Evidently, distance teaching is much more than writing teaching type comments. The distance teacher must be careful about the relationship between the comments s/he writes and the grades s/he awards — a really difficult task, which nevertheless, can be learnt and mastered.

3.5 QUERIES ABOUT THE GRADES/ COMMENTS

If not many, there certainly are some cases when on receiving the evaluated response the distance learner would like to know the 'why' and 'how' of the grades s/he was awarded and/or the comments that were written on the response. It is the duty of the distance teacher to answer such questions with great understanding and sympathy. Personal comments (see Unit 1) can be written on the assignment-responses, but such comments can be written more effectively in response to the queries about grades etc.

To look for the general nature of responses to such queries, we had distributed some dummy-letters among those trainees who were found to have failed to assess the responses properly. The letters were passed on to them after the assessment exercises were over. Most letters asked for an explanation or a discussion on the grades awarded. In Unit 4, we have presented a detailed discussion on this issue along with the sample of these letters and also those of the responses which were written by the respective assessors (distance teachers). As answering such letters is a task that is naturally taken up after the teaching-task, i.e., after grading and commenting are over, we may call these activities post-teaching tasks.

However, here we need to highlight the point that this exercise brought to our notice what may be called the 'clash of egos'. Most of the trainees (assessors in this case) said that their awards need no revision. Many of them defended their stand (i.e., the comments they had written and/or the grades they had awarded) by whatever arguments they could think of, which included attacking the distance learner concerned. It appears that once a grade is awarded or a comment written by an assessor, s/he finds it difficult to change his/her stand even if s/he is convinced of the weakness of his/her stand. Thus, professional honesty gets sacrificed in a clash of egos. This clash of egos (the ego of the distance teacher on the one hand and that of the distance learner on the other) stands as a barrier between the teacher and the learner, as the two fail to reach each other and the process of distance teaching/learning as a whole, ends in failure.

In this connection, we must suggest that it is desirable on the part of the distance teacher to give up being egoistic, and, thus, weaken that barrier right from the very beginning. But, then, s/he needs to learn to do so. Personal comments promote academically purposeful communication between the teacher and the learner; they also help in reducing the possibilities of clashes caused by egoism.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

To view clearly what we achieved in this unit we need to turn back to sub-section 2.2.2 (Unit 2). We said that the experiment/workshop which these units (Units 2 & 3) are based on, was divided into three phases.

- Pre-teaching tasks (Phase I) — problems therein and solutions thereof were taken up and covered in unit 2 itself.
- Teaching tasks (Phase 2) — it was suggested that these tasks have two components — commenting on responses, and grading the responses. Of these two, **commenting** was taken up and covered in Unit 2. The second component, i.e., **grading** has been the theme of this unit, i.e., Unit 3.
- Post-teaching tasks (Phase 3) will be taken up in unit 4 which is to follow.

Grading being the theme of this unit, we outline here what it is all about.

- Grading, besides being an indication of what the teacher thinks of an assignment-response, is a pedagogic tool to help the learner to improve his/her learning effort and techniques.
- In order to make this tool really effective pedagogically, it needs to have three qualities:
 - i) grading should be 'perfect';
 - ii) grading should agree with the corresponding comments; and
 - iii) the communication that follows (after grading etc.) should be helpful to the learner.
- There are at least four difficulties (called discrimination factors) which lie in the way of making grading 'perfect'. These are:
 - i) imperfect knowledge (on the part of the assessor) of what the unit presents and aims at;
 - ii) imperfect understanding (on the part of the assessor) of the assignment and of the learner's abilities;
 - iii) assessor's own view of a good/ideal response/answer to the assignment; and
 - iv) assessor's short or inconsistent attention span.

Ways and means of overcoming these difficulties have been suggested and discussed in the relevant sub-sections. We must remind you here that though we discussed the assessor's tendencies towards being lenient or strict, we decided not to give any importance to this factor.

Towards the close of the unit, we discussed two other significant issues:

- For bringing about the required agreement between the grades awarded and the comments written, we have suggested that the distance teacher has to go about it consciously with deliberate effort and care. S/he may do it naturally after a lot of experience but to begin with, one has to work consciously to master this technique.

- Leaving the theme of post-teaching communication for unit 4, we have only suggested that such communication may have the tendency of turning into a clash of egos between the distance learner and the distance teacher, and that it is the duty of the latter not only to eliminate that clash but also to make such communication interesting and purposeful. For a fuller discussion/exposition of this theme please turn to unit 4 now.

UNIT 4 SUPPLEMENTAL INTERACTION

Unit Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Discussion of the Biases of the conventional teacher: A Justification
- 4.3 Significance of Supplemental Interaction
- 4.4 More About Supplemental Interaction
 - 4.4.1 Tasks of a distance teacher
 - 4.4.2 Submission density of assignments
 - 4.4.3 Tutorials
- 4.5 Let Us Sum up

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we aim at justifying our discussion on the biases of a conventional teacher and at 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 institution in order to better his/her performance and make his/her teaching more purposeful. Then, we have discussed the notions of submission density 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 'pre-requisites' 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.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 1 of this block we focused on tutor-comments — the need for them, their functions, 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 2 and 3 dealt with additional issues pertaining to distance tuition. In the main, we 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 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. Such knowledge/information is likely to help them overcome these biases. Besides, we discussed the question of 'uniformity' in evaluation, when more than one evaluator is engaged in the task of 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 made was 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.

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

In the academic world distance education is an entirely new phenomenon (see unit 1, block 1, course ES-311), even more so in the developing world. It is not unusual, therefore, for reasonably knowledgeable people to raise questions like "After all, what does one 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 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 on 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 correspondence course institutes 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 seconded to the institute for a specific period, which may be 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 lessons;
 - 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 utilising 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, s/he is familiar with the material provided in the teaching units. Besides, it provides him/her the much needed feedback — s/he 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 reception and the returning 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), ii(b), and ii(c) imply that the problems of the distance learners, namely, their lack of motivation, their 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 difficulties caused by these problems. However, the corresponding problems of the distance teachers have not been identified, as there is no mention of them in the document under consideration. It is so obviously 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 former 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 spelled out explicitly. 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, s/he has, at least, observed his/her own teachers performing the said tasks over the years and may follow any of the models s/he knows. The distance teacher on the other hand, has no models to depend on. And, therefore, it is not without reason that s/he 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 s/he 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 i(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 s/he, if not a conventional teacher? If s/he 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 while on his/her job have not even been recognised, 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 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 2 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.

Note: a) Space is given below for you to write your answer.
b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal dotted lines, typical of notebook paper. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings present.

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 backgrounds 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 generalisations which must prove helpful to a prospective distance teacher. We shall, in the main, focus on the generalisation 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 the 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 comparing 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 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/-

L2

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 that I have get 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 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,

Your comments on my grading. Thanks very much. 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 he 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 and would present better in your next set of assignments. Wishing you '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 point:

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

How do you react to my views?

Yours sincerely,

St. No. 1

R3

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 is correct. So I am regrading your A as B and B as an 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 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

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 better your grades.

Yours sincerely,

Sd/-

R1 (ii)

Dear Mr.

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 will 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 award 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 me, I am worried about the grades.

Your sincerely,

St. No. 2

R2 (i)

Dear Friend,

In response to your suggestions, I should 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 fact 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 giving him a C).

You can improve by reading newspapers daily.

Yours sincerely,

Sd/-

R2 (ii)

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 had to discuss the principles for the selection of text books which you could not do even the least. I awarded you 'E' immaterial of the fact that your English is

weak but keeping the irrelevance of your answer in view. You have written whatever has struck in 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 but its every line is upto 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.

Most shocking is 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 scoring 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 the answer is too short I feel. It is an essay type of question and I expect you to write more on the subject.

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

Yours sincerely,

Sd/-

R3 (ii)

Dear Learner No. 1

I am happy that you have 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 answers the two parts of the assignment whereas yours touches only the principles of a good Text.

No. 2 doubt - 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 I

Letter 1, Reply 1

The evaluator admits 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 else does not want to get into an argument. We hope that the former is the case.

CATEGORY II

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

Notice the difference between the two replies—while the first is explanatory in the main, 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 and reply (i) and then the explanatory reply (ii). The last two sentences in the second reply are in bad taste.

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 s/he is the best evaluator of his/her own performance (Many learners have explicitly stated what grades they should have been awarded).

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

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'?

Note: a) Space is given below for you to write your answer.

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

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4.4 MORE ABOUT SUPPLEMENTAL INTERACTION

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 the distance teacher;
- ii) submission density of assignment;
- iii) tutorials.

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

4.4.1 Tasks of a distance teacher

A distance teacher should be able to:

- i) motivate the distance learner to remain on course, help him/her get started again whenever or wherever s/he gets stuck because of whatever reasons—academic or extra-academic;
- ii) provide individualised guidance—each distance learner has to be approached and attended to individually, as his/her abilities, previous experience and the required reinforcement patterns differ from those of peers in a number of ways;
- iii) provide feedback on learner performance and also on one's success in the positive transfer and successful application of new learning;
- iv) remove the sense of isolation which the distance learner is bound to suffer from and make him/her feel that she/he is one among many fellow learners, though s/he does not meet them everyday;
- v) stimulate independent and original thinking, problem solving and discovering knowledge; and
- vi) help 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 learner. 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 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 assignments

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 an 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 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 organised 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 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 unit 3, block 2, 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 the characteristics of guided didactic conversation, the stronger the learners' feelings of personal relationship between them and the supporting organisation.
- The stronger the learners' feelings that the supporting organisation is interested in making the study matter personally relevant to them, the greater their personal involvement.
- The stronger the learners' feelings of personal relations to the supporting organisation and of being personally involved with the study matter, the stronger the motivation and the more effective the learning.

- The more independent, scholarly and experienced the learners, the less relevant 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 variously emphasised the ability to encourage and inspire learners, the ability to visualise/imagine the difficulties and needs 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:

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

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 into being, we need to emphasise that essentially a tutorial is supposed to provide effective didactic communication between the learner and the teacher. This 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 obtain in a classroom and a tutorial. In a classroom situation the teacher addresses him/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 him/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 him/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 cannot build personal relations with a large number of learners). The teaching and learning process in a tutorial can be learner-centred (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, idiosyncracies, physical handicaps, upbringing or behaviour, 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 'individualises' 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 'individualised' 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 teachers, and give them more time to work on 'open' assignments, which is also an advantage for the learners).

Check Your Progress 3

Point out at least two unique positive features in:

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

Note: a) Write your answer in the space given below.

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

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4.5 LET US SUM UP

As a confirmation of our discussion on the biases of a conventional teacher (see units 2 & 3), in this unit we discussed:

- the complexities of distance teaching which even the supreme educational bodies such as the University Grants Commission could not visualise at initial stages, mainly because of lack of experience in offering education through a new mode;
- the consequences of forcing conventional teachers to function as distance teachers without examining whether or not they meet the prerequisites essential for distance teaching;
- the urgent need to drastically change the policies that have been followed by the Correspondence Courses 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.

Check Your Progress: Possible Answers

- 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.
 - iii) Evaluation methods and contact-programmes demand from a distance teacher particular skills and approaches which a conventional teacher need not have.
- 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 matter of fact.
- 3) a) i) Classroom lectures, followed immediately by tutorials enable the 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.

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NOTES