

# **Promoting Learner Autonomy with Scenario-Based Learning: Experiences from an Innovative Teacher Education Programme in India.**

**Theme: Formal Education**  
**Sub Theme: Revamping Teacher Education**

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## **Abstract**

Online education is gradually gaining momentum in India, especially at the higher education level, and educational Institutions are undertaking several initiatives to explore and adopt different approaches to ensure their quality. One such initiative is the development of a Bachelor of e-Education program under the aegis of I-CONSENT, implemented by Maharashtra Knowledge Corporation Limited (MKCL), Pune and Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU), Nashik. This programme adopts the scenario-based learning approach to develop the desired roles and competencies among the teachers. As the developers of this programme envisaged six facets for an effective on-line teacher, each of these facets were developed as an individual course. Each course focused on its related roles and competencies. On the whole, this programme aimed at preparing a reflective teacher, who is capable of undertaking multiple roles, keeping in view their local context.

This paper attempts to explore the efficiency of a scenario based design in terms of providing the scope to the learner to choose, create and implement learning experiences based on ground realities. The Learning assignments, resources and artifacts prepared by the learners for a selected course entitled: "Teacher as a networker and change agent" would be shared to illustrate how learner autonomy was reflected in this programme. In this course efforts were made to equip the learners to work in a networked environment and also operate as an agent for social change. Based on the learning outcomes derived from the learners, it was noticed that the learners chose different learning paths and had customized their outcomes based on the requirements of their living context. This implied that the approach of scenario based learning design had wide relevance to Indian context, especially keeping in view its cultural diversity.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The e.B.Ed programme that was initiated under the aegis of Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU), Maharashtra Knowledge Corporation Limited (MKCL) and I-CONSENT, right from its genesis underwent several disputes and apprehensions, and yet after resolving these uncertainties, it was ultimately launched in May 2009. During the process of implementation of this programme, few disappointments did surface, nevertheless, there were also certain tangible outcomes which were favourable and were never anticipated prior to the implementation. One such outcome is the potential of Scenario-based learning approach to nurture autonomy among its learners by enabling them to customize their abilities according to the reality settings and most particular contribute towards social transformation.

## **STUDY SAMPLE**

The sample for this study constituted the learners who were enrolled for the first batch of the e.B.Ed programme. Learners willing to participate in this study were only contacted for obtaining the required data. Among the total of 45 students, 21 (47%) expressed willingness to participate. The data

was collected from the learners via interviews and self-reports. Interviews were conducted telephonically and a few preferred to write down and sent their responses. Apart from utilizing the data from the learners, selected assignments submitted by them were also used as resources for data.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF LEARNER AUTONOMY**

The prevailing diversity in India has posed several challenges for educationist to especially design an educational system that catered to the varied needs of its stake holders, ranging from students to professionals from different fields. The area of teacher education has always been a concern, and hence underwent reformation periodically to keep in pace with the classroom dynamics. To maintain the quality of these teacher education programmes, common curriculum frameworks are usually developed for teacher education institutions, by the State and District level governing bodies. Provision of a common curriculum framework for teacher education programmes, on one hand, may seem to address the issue of quality while on the other hand, it does raise queries regarding its relevance to varied social contexts. Since the student teachers after completion of this programme, are more likely to be equipped with a common set of teacher competencies, irrespective of the kind of school they are going to be placed in. At this juncture, it is essential to realize that there exists a wide range of disparity in the learning processes that takes place in the classrooms located in rural, urban or tribal contexts. In such situation, it is possible that these student teachers when are employed as teachers may experience conflicts and would not be able to adapt efficiently according to requirements of the school. Therefore, rather than focusing on the outcomes specified in the common framework, there is a need to nurture them as teachers who can function as autonomous individuals and can tune themselves according to the social requirements of their school. The innovative e.B.Ed programme that was launched in India has, to a large extent addressed to this issue and an attempt is made to demonstrate how scenario based learning approach facilitates learning autonomy. These were manifested in different facets among the learners in a selected course.

## **ABOUT THIS PROGRAMME**

This programme was conceived with the idea that online learning can offer students the opportunity for more self-directed learning and flexible structures for engagement, which are likely to increase their levels of autonomy, emotional independence, and self-direction (McBrien & Jone, 2009). Trying to lay emphasis on the principles of constructivism and context-based learning, the planners believed that the scenario based learning would be an appropriate approach for India's diverse context. The significant feature of this programme is that the learning activities framed were generic and they permitted the learners to articulate and engage in tasks that are related to their real-life problems.

## **Programme Deployment**

Each course of this programme focused on development of selected roles and its related competencies a teacher is required to perform effectively. The courses were deployed one after the other in a sequence and the time span for each varied from eight to ten weeks, and 4-5 distributed classroom sessions. To participate in the distributed classroom session, the learners had to visit their respective study centers, which lasted for six to seven hours. These sessions were generally conducted by the course team members who oriented the learners towards the course syllabus and also guided them to undertake selected learning activities. To fulfill the requirements of each course, the learners were required to complete a set of learning assignments within the given time span. The assignments were assessed by the course team and a special feature of these assignments is that they were less content-based and more process-based, wherein the learner had to perform the task in his social setting or reflect and describe how he would perform the task in his/her setting.

### **Illustration 1: Network Facilitators**

Select two schools in your locality. Visit each one of these schools and identify the kind of networks operating in these schools ....the students are involved. Compare the nature of

networks .....in these two schools are involved. Evaluate students' participation in these networks and identify the factors that facilitate students to enroll in such networks.

#### Illustration 2: Designing Networks

Watch the following video about a disaster. You are disturbed and concerned about the life of the people and hence you want to do something to help the people involved. What are the different kinds of virtual networks you would form to provide services for the people who experienced this disaster?

### **PERCEPTIONS ON LEARNER AUTONOMY**

The term learner autonomy was debated for long as capacity or behaviours, learner responsibility or learner control, psychological phenomenon with political implications or political right with psychological implications (Jing- yuan, 2007; Little, 1996). From the review conducted, it is noticed that learner autonomy has extensively been explored in the area of language learning and the role of learner is largely confined to the programme s/he is enrolled for (Moore, 1993; Holden & Usuki, 1999; Usuki, 2002).

The learners involved in this study also seemed to perceive this concept in relation to their e.B.Ed programme itself. Their definitions ranged from 'freedom to answer' to 'being independent' and 'intrinsically motivated'. Some indicated 'some chance should be given to use ' own learning style' or "'I" will decide how to develop my ability or skills, how to be responsible for my own decisions and also how to take charge of my own learning'. The desire for freedom or be on their own are clearly evident from the following statements; 'The autonomous learner is a self-activated maker of meaning, an active agent in his own learning process', 'A learner who is not bound by any limit or any outside forces to learn. He or she is totally open minded to new learning'. The operational definition of this term is provided in the following section.

### **DEFINING LEARNER AUTONOMY**

The following section defines the term 'learner autonomy' in relation to the present study and reveals how a scenario based learning approach has facilitated learner autonomy for the course entitled 'Teacher and networker and social change'. This course primarily offers opportunities for a learner to experience and visualize roles of being able to work in a networked environment and function as a change agent both in the school and society. It largely focused on achieving the following learning outcomes;

1. Identify and develop strategies for working effectively in a net-worked environment.
2. Promote networking for enhancing knowledge and social awareness among different target groups.
3. Stimulate institutions to use contemporary information and communications technologies in education.
4. Facilitate use of ICT mechanisms for the promotion of social transformation.

Based on the learning outcomes defined for the selected course, learner autonomy in the present study has been viewed from a broader perspective as the ability of the learner to articulate his abilities to confront issues s/he faces in a reality situation and contribute towards the development of the society. This to some extent also takes into consideration the learners' perspective as the ability to modulate and deploy learning styles that are relevant to his/her social context.

### **POTENTIAL OF SCENARIO BASED APPROACH**

Learners, during and after completion of this course initiated several networking activities in their school or community. Few have gone further ahead to enhance technology facilities in the school or their work place. Selected cases have been described to disclose the kind of autonomy the learners have demonstrated while undertaking this course.

#### **1. Promoting ICT in a Rural School**

She is a non-working mother who works on voluntary basis and initiated two activities; developed a computer lab and created a digital library to enhance the quality of education in a Zilla Parishad girl's school situated in a village. She had to begin right from convincing the school authorities, teachers and students to holding discussions with the District Head for sanctioning the computers and obtaining contributions from the community, and subsequently training the teachers as well as the students. Today the school has a functional computer lab and digital library.

The challenge face by her is evident in her voice "It all started with one broken computer in a dimly lit room, with teachers not being sure as how to react to this new inclusion in the regular curriculum. Students were just attending the computer class because someone else wants them to. The journey from there was not easy and finally only through persistent efforts the visible change for today could be achieved".

## **2. Enhancing Performance at Workplace**

He is an engineer by profession and has been using different ICT tools to enhance the performance of the staff. He stated "For networking and introduction of technology we have initiated and enhanced use of the share point for the storing and sharing of the information, MS office communicator for audio call and virtual meetings, mind mapping tool for identifying and structuring contents, education on computer awareness for removing fear and enhancing confidence of eLearner, use of webex for virtual meetings and online support for the e-Learners."

## **3. Liberalizing Self**

She is a non-working mother who reformed herself by initiating several activities via social networking sites. This also provided her a platform to share her views and thoughts with both local and global community. She did excessive blogging on the issue of global warming, initiated school networks to link the parents with the school, created a network for women to discuss about health and plans to initiate a consortium for linking schools.

According to her, "Networking a word which was a Greek and Latin for me, today the same networking is a part and parcel of my life.....Once on the multiply(social networking site) I took off and today I have done networking for so many issues. We did networking for Loyola parent's, site formed to encourage interaction between parents and students. ....Today it is not active but we plan to start our maths networking club using the same infrastructure."

## **4. Creating Parent Teacher Networks**

One of the assignments: Need Assessment Survey, of this course especially instigated several networking activities;

Assignment Detail: Plan a PTA (Parent-Teacher Association) network that would electronically link the parents with the schools. Develop a questionnaire to obtain the parents' opinions and views on introducing this kind of programme. Administer this questionnaire to a sample group of parents. Also conduct interviews with a few principals and obtain their views on this kind of network.

The above assignment had inspired many of the learners to establish parent teacher networks in schools they had access to.

### **a. Networking Parents in a city**

She is a non-working mother, who tried to initiate a network with the parents of her daughter's school. However, her experience was disappointing, which was revealed in her report.

"Skepticism about social network, unavailability of time to spend in networking, hesitation in communication was some factors that seem to underplay in the network.... As it is a new concept to

many of them, may be a lot of time will be required at the initial level to motivate these people and also convince them to get involved in networking for their own benefit.”

b. Networking Parents in a village

However, in another case, a teacher from a rural school succeeded in creating a network with the parents of his school using mobile network. Parents of 30 students joined the mobile network created at [www.way2sms.com](http://www.way2sms.com), a site that provides service to send free sms to any mobiles in India. This network is in operation even today to monitor students progress, by sending meeting details to parents, informing parents if the students were not regular to school and declaration of holidays. Language continues to be a barrier in this communication.

The teacher declared, “Although we have not been successful completely, we were able to obtain the support of parents especially from the rural areas is itself a major achievement for us”.

c. Staying connected with school

She is a non-working mother, who felt disconnected from his son's school during her maternity stage. This motivated her to start a network with parents of her son's class. Although the response from the mothers was not encouraging, the fathers showed better enthusiasm.

She said “I was expecting all the parents will give the data, but I got very strange experiences”.

d. Alternatives for Networking

Another learner planned a Parent-Teacher Association Network, by initiating them to join Google groups and those could did not have access to Internet, encourage them to join mobile network created by her.

**5. Ask for Help! It's Fine.**

Apart from initiating change in system, there have also been instances where learners changed themselves.

A learner revealed, “being a professional copywriter I have always been very comfortable with the written word. But equally, have always been shy of speaking in formal settings such as meetings, interviews, vivas etc. Another problem has been about asking for help. I don't mind extending it to anybody but am uncomfortable asking for help for fear of proving a nuisance. Regarding asking for help, my unique situation of pregnancy and prevailing swine flu epidemic made it impossible for me to approach any schools..... for an assignment that required me to compare networking between two schools I was forced to ask a colleague for help.. she was so forthcoming! She actually spoke to school parents and sent mails to school teachers and... Finally I got to do the assignment well and realised that people are very ok with helping. Guess the above personality changes might seem too insignificant for many, but believe me, for me it was a big first step in a change I have always wanted to see in myself”.

**DISCUSSION**

Based on the experiences of the learners, it is confirmed that one may require less effort to function as a traditional teacher, but it is more challenging to perform as a progressive teacher. Although the course inputs intended to develop teachers to be reflective and process oriented, few learners still preferred to be traditionally oriented. There have been complaints that less emphasis was laid on content and they found the assignments to be cumbersome. Like a few wrote ‘there are more practical and less theory’, while few others who differed, declared ‘activity in schools are though time consuming, but more enlightening’ and ‘it has provided the opportunity to be creative with result oriented learning’. Yet one needs to realize that the learners have to detach themselves from traditional learning styles and lay focus on their process skills. Further, the flexibility nature of the assignments has permitted the learners to be autonomous. Just as one said ‘As I wanted to find out working of the parent teacher association I was free to interview parents from my locality....Visualizing networks was also a good exercise as it gave us

full autonomy to think' and another confessed 'This course gave us the freedom to do the assignments as per our wish and capacity. For example, I made a ppt (power point) on school networking for disabled children. That was my own creation nobody instructed me or asked me why u did this and that'.

Context based learning activities have also encouraged the learners to choose their own learning paths, as one said 'we used our own ideas while doing assignments' and the other shared 'We could develop our plans to promote ICT in schools and other places'. Highlighting specifically the assignments, a learner wrote '...i never thought of doing all these things. But the assignments made me think about them to make plan and implement it. There were many more like exploring networks, join e discussion, etc. activities help me to be a learner for life time'. Traces of learners inclination towards social transformation was also noticed which is evident in this voice, 'The way I have done this course is somewhat like extensive study of my own from the net and library, cross checking the doubts with friends, explored the possibilities that I can do in my community'.

Lastly from our experiences, we've realized that the time period for completing the learning assignments have to be relooked and carefully planned to prevent overload and stress among the learners and the issue of copy rights have to be given more priority.

## CONCLUSION

Indian classrooms are dynamic due to the prevalence of diverse conditions both within and outside the school and this may vary geographically, socially or even on the type of school management. The teaching-learning environments are less likely to be similar when one moves from one school to another. Thereby implying that the roles and competencies a teacher is likely to utilize vary from school to school. Even though the prevailing teacher education programmes are comprehensive, they prefer to adopt a common framework to ensure quality rather than to cater for a wide social entity. In this context, scenario based learning approach has the potential to regenerate several pathways for teacher education programs in India, especially prepare teachers to articulate their capacities in accordance to the school realities and function as an autonomous individual in order to contribute towards social transformation.

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