

ADDRESSING THE ODL CONTOURS OF LITERARY STUDIES

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Abstract

At a time, when access and equity are increasingly being seen as the main reference points of ODL systems across the world, and when the need for measurable vocational and professional education is becoming more and more pertinent, studying liberal arts through ODL can also offer extensive potential as a form of enriched learning experience. Despite various pitfalls and loopholes in the developing countries, the ODL system may be considered an apparatus of recovery of valuable educative experiences. Of course, this view may be flawed, but it stems from the rapid pace of transformations of the contemporary society, which has now become burdened with the need to integrate with the forces of 'globalization'. For those concerned with linking 'development' with 'education', ODL comes as a powerful answer to the question of upgrading the teaching-learning processes in higher education for high-quality development of an individual. However, the practical criteria for judging an ODL programme thus is sought to be related to the learning outcomes that it effects. In today's competitive world, 'employability' is one of the major concerns of higher education, and subsequently, technical and vocational education have gained a better competitive edge, which is because the measurement of individual accomplishment is possible in such education. However, the same may not be possible in case of a less tangible discipline like the liberal arts, or 'Eng. Lit.' to be more specific. In countries like Japan, humanities departments are dying out because of their failure to cope with the tremendous pressure to submit to the market-forces. This paper shall try to assess how the teachers/educators of a discipline like 'Eng. Lit.' often face a dilemma of measuring the learning outcome-whether their discipline helps the learners to comprehend both skills training and liberal learning. This paper shall further try to address how the ODL contours of literary studies can also provide a sustainable learning environment in which the learners can garner their ability to appreciate cultural subtlety, literary nuances or analytical balance, which are essential indicators necessary for a healthy living in an integrated and cultured society.

Keywords: ODL, Literary Studies, Eng. Lit., Learning Outcome.

1. INTRODUCTION

For those concerned with linking 'development' with 'education', ODL comes as a powerful answer to the question of upgrading the teaching-learning processes for high-quality development of an individual in the field of higher education. However, the practical criteria for judging an ODL programme are still being related to the learning outcomes that it affects. In today's competitive world, 'employability' is the main concern of all aspiring and existing learners, and subsequently, technical and vocational education have gained a better competitive edge, which is because the measurement of individual accomplishment in such education is somewhat possible. However, the same may not be the case with a less tangible discipline like the liberal arts under the humanities departments. In this regard, one may refer to the letter from the Japanese education minister Hakubun Shimomura in September 2015, which he had sent to all 86 national universities of Japan, calling on them to take "active steps to abolish social science and humanities organisations or to convert them to serve areas

that better meet society's needs." (Source: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com>). The call to close the liberal arts and social science faculties in the Japanese universities was believed to be part of wider efforts by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to promote what he intended to call "more practical vocational education that better anticipates the needs of society". Although relevant contextually, this move that sent shivers down academic spines worldwide. It is against this background that an attempt has been made in this paper to address how the teachers/educators/students of a humanities discipline like literary studies or more specifically 'Eng. Lit.' often face a dilemma of measuring the learning outcome, whether this discipline helps the learners to comprehend both skill-training and liberal learning, which can further impact the learning outcome of the students.

2. OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the study are to

- Identify some of the issues related to offering literary studies programmes through the ODL mode
- Explain how the use of digital technologies have unleashed the educational potentials even of a subject like 'Eng. Lit.', and
- Discuss how studying 'Eng. Lit.' through ODL can also offer extensive potential as a form of enriched learning experience with social relevance and sustainable learning outcome.

3. METHODOLOGY

This is a research paper conducted mostly on the basis of secondary sources available in different books, articles, and various web resources. While preparing this paper, descriptive and theoretical research methodology have been used. Besides, analysis has been done based on the data extracted from the secondary sources of information.

4. ODL AND LITERARY STUDIES

Open and Distance Learning or ODL stands to offer extensive potential as a form of the learning experience with two of its most considerable mottos-access and equity which are now increasingly being seen as the main reference-points of higher education across the world. However, at a time when the question of maximising the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Higher Education has been a priority for a country like India, the scope of higher education, combined with the rapid strides in digital technologies, has metamorphosed into a need-based service. Subsequently, ODL is being seen as the outgrowth of an economic measure aimed at answering the worldwide call to 'globalise' the educational system. Therefore, inevitably, qualities like access, equity and quality have become the chief coordinates of the criteria by which the ODL systems are held up to scrutiny in India. As the profile of distance learners is rapidly changing in the face of the 21st century, and as more and more young people are opting for flexible distance education, lifelong learning through ODL is promoted as means to meet the urgency of an unstable labour market requiring and enabling the frequent change of jobs, throughout one's career. As far as the labour market is concerned, one would expect employers to require expertise rather than general knowledge from a university graduate. However, if this is acceptable with the science-based and vocational subjects, the same may not hold true for the humanities subjects.

In the Indian education system, as also in those of many other countries, the teaching of 'Eng. Lit.' for example, poses significant challenges when transferred from face-to-face to the ODL setting. Traditionally aimed at developing students' reading skills and interpretative abilities, this discipline has

faced great difficulties and challenges when disengaged from such means as peer interaction, reciprocal classroom discussion normally practised in the regular mode. Furthermore, ODL is always a challenge in itself and to teach any academic subject to the students who may have been away from formal education for a long time, or who would not necessarily fulfil the entry requirements of other universities, or who may lack prior knowledge of the subject, calls for clearly defined strategies and effective practices. Digital technologies have certainly unlocked unprecedented educational potentials and opportunities, yet the use of technologies and online resources raises many other pertinent questions. Here, reference can be made to a research conducted by the School of Humanities of the Hellenic Open University and co-funded by the European Union (EU) and the Greek Ministry of Education during 2004–06 as mentioned by Anastasia Natsina in her essay “Tendencies and Stakes of Literary Studies in European Open and Distance Learning Universities.” The researchers visited nine European open universities including UKOU and studied the teaching of literature in 16 programmes offered therein. One of the important findings of the research was that the teaching of literature fell within two major categories of programmes: (a) strictly literary and (b) more broadly cultural (or ‘humanistic’). They found that the mature humanities students were more likely to seek general education than a strictly vocational degree, which is usually required at the beginning of one’s career. Besides, they found that broader curricula point to more liberal agendas that seek to widen participation in higher education by moving away from the specialised degrees of an elite system as well as by contributing to the students’ balanced development. This kind of agenda is certainly in tune with the foundational principles of open education in general. On the other hand, it is also equally rational to assume that, as most ODL students are first-timers in higher education, they have strong expectations of using their degree for professional purposes. (Kayalis & Anastasia, 2010, p. 7)

Natsina in the same essay also reiterates that rooted in the principles that historically defined open education, broad curricula are very much in tune with the latest social as well as academic developments. Under this prism, the teaching of literature as part of a broader curriculum should perhaps be the object of careful scrutiny, especially as this type of curriculum is often the locus of resistances that stem from the tradition of the subject and quite possibly act against the students’ best interests. Recognition of such resistances and engagement with the pressing pedagogical questions of curriculum building is essential for the creative transformation of the subject in the context of ODL. (Kayalis & Anastasia, p. 33). Here, the author also quotes from J. Parker’s essay “Humanities higher education: new models, new challenges” “where discrete disciplines can be reinstated as units within a broader humanities paradigm, bound together by common and open teaching aims and practices rather than separated off as discrete knowledge domains. The coherence of the paradigm must lie in the common pursuit of the humanities’ objectives and practices, rather than in disciplines appropriating and controlling specialist practices and knowledge. (Kayalis & Anastasia, p. 15)

This seems to support the humanities disciplines as a means of enabling students to develop their critical abilities through engaging with a subject’s discourse and methodologies rather than consume unconnected knowledge, while also attending to common humanities practices. This may be valuable as a basis for rethinking the teaching of literature in broad ODL curricula. In such a framework, the resistance expressed by insistence on national literatures at the expense of comparative literature, for instance, could be used as an opportunity to engage students in this particular discipline. However, for this to become possible, it has been argued that literature courses should not be offered separately from the theoretical considerations and the methodological apparatus that have shaped the discipline. Students should be encouraged as well as offered the tools to engage critically with the subject and understand its historical formation, as well as the questions and mechanisms that drive its development in the present day. Henceforth, it needs to be mentioned that the education providers must take into consideration all these issues relating to the purpose and goals of literary studies before launching a course like this.

However, while providing the learners a scope to engage critically with literature, literary studies may come up with other possibilities. Let me here refer to Amy Koritz's essay "Beyond Teaching Tolerance: Literary Studies in a Democracy", where the author makes an interesting remark on the purpose of literary studies and the role of the university professors by hinting at a more philanthropic goal of literary studies. He states the following:

Here I offer two proposals. First, as a strategy, we should reconceptualise the purposes of literary studies and our roles as professors of that discipline in a manner that places at its center the Jeffersonian goal of education in a democracy. Because literature engages the subjective dimensions of experience in ways that evoke empathy with lives different from our own, it provides a unique and powerful pathway for exploring the relation of individuals to the public realm. Second, the tactical actions aligned with this strategy should include crossing the borders between classroom and community and adopting curricular and pedagogical change that recognises the centrality of civic engagement to higher education. Placing literary studies in the context of an education for citizenship in a democracy begins the discussion of how we might understand and enact the public purposes of literary studies. To the extent that acknowledging and respecting diversity is integral to such a context, teaching tolerance would become not something we need to think about the wisdom of doing or neglecting but something at the heart of the enterprise." (Koritz, 2005, p. 80)

Hopefully, more than anything else, such positive views on literary studies would help the universities across the globe, to regain the 'lost' importance of humanities courses and more specifically of the 'less tangible' humanities programmes like 'Eng. Lit.'. Even if the needs and demands of the 21st century seem to make a discipline like 'Eng. Lit.' look 'invisible' as an academic subject, it will never cease to remain an integral part of the present-day society. As ODL has been increasingly being used for the democratisation of education, our point is that humanities disciplines, the way it is currently made available through the ODL programmes across the world, shall never die out following the pressure of employability and the labour forces of the 21st century, simply because of the fact that millions of learners can immensely benefit from such courses by learning to co-exist with the society they live in.

5. DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND LITERARY STUDIES

The excessive use of digital technologies in the field of ODL has affected the ways in which education has been organised and delivered through the Virtual Learning Environment or VEL, which is becoming a buzzword of modern education system. This new reality has reconfigured higher education, offering to some universities a way to diversify their academic activities. In aligning a traditional subject such as 'Eng. Lit.' with the distinctive features of ODL, practical experience shows the difficulty involved with the production of SLM (self-learning material) which alone is undoubtedly a very expensive affair. In the euphoria over the range of possible applications of ICT-based methods, which cast teacher and student on an almost even footing in the pedagogic relationship, even educators engaged with ODL regard the delivery of academic course material as defining the core of ODE in current times. The elation with technological development has however tended to eclipse the interconnections between technology, pedagogical values, the role of the teacher and the learner whose needs have come to be narrowly tagged on to the matter of examinations and degrees only. The realization that more learners can now avail the benefits of intellectual development has persuaded a majority of ODL educators that the efficient management of the delivery system will ease most of the difficulties that deter distance learners from learning.

However, with the maturing of higher education in India, and with the gradual spread and strengthening of ODL, it has become increasingly recognised that the content of the learner-support services—such as personalised phone-in counselling and the face-to-face contact sessions needs to be better visualised. As Stella & Gnanam have observed, distance education offers a new paradigm of

the educational experience, and hence, we need to explore the features of this new paradigm/experience. Perhaps more often than strictly justified, ODL has been translated to mean better management of the delivery system persuading the ODL educators/managers that 'access' is its politically correct equivalent. The practical conduct of an ODL programme involves the teacher and the learner in a relationship or even a set of transactions that move beyond the simple act of enlarging 'access' to a discipline by the infusion of greater doses of web-based resources. In this regard, the online presence of the teachers through a Learning Management System (LMS) or MOOCs is mention-worthy. Similarly, adequate library resources, besides other web-based resources, are also crucial factors in the nurturing of the self-conducted inquiry of the ODL learner. To that extent, all applications of ICT-based or telecommunication technologies have to recover this important part of the learning landscape. In this context, I would like to make a reference to Hellenga (1982) who tries to encapsulate the literary experience in his essay, "What is the Literary Experience Like?" where he states that the reading of literature—as in the case of almost every discipline—has its own distinctive characteristics. This has important implications for the conduct of "Eng. Lit." programmes in the ODL mode. Therefore, the efficient management of student-support services through digital mode, which includes the timing and structuring of contact programmes, requires better awareness of the resources that a learner must utilise in order to feed an individual sense of inquiry and also to feel at home in the learning process.

In her essay "Delivering Literary Studies in the Twenty-first Century: The Relevance of Online Pedagogies" Kristine L. Blair states that within both academic and cultural contexts, the relevance of literary studies is often challenged by students and university administrators alike within a larger culture that has increasingly defined education as a commodity, a means to a financial end in terms of both enrolments and students' professional success. In this shift to a customer-service model of higher education, English departments have been forced to consider the role that distance delivery plays in curriculum development and student recruitment, to sustain its relevance by acknowledging the need to extend the curriculum through delivery systems that meet the needs of non-traditional learners, often a primary audience for distance education. The phrase 'forced to' may seem a harsh assessment of English faculty, but admittedly it is still difficult for many university faculty to acknowledge that the critical reading and writing practices of the liberal arts are often perceived by students as subordinate to twentieth-century literacy practices that include text messaging, YouTube, Facebook, and other forms of social networking and digital entertainment. Besides, many faculty view much of this technology as a distraction from their preconceived understanding of what it means to read, write, and communicate in academic settings, rather than as a vital component of the curriculum in a twenty-first-century university where, print is not dead but is instead 'remediated' through a range of technologies (Kayalis & Anastasia, p. 67).

Thus, regardless of the resistance to technology among some academics, it is also a question of what kind of technology one will include and when to impart higher education on literary studies. Inevitably, both new and emergent media technologies and the increasingly diverse and techno-savvy student populations are in a way helping us to understand what English studies actually is or can be in the face of the twenty-first century knowledge society.

6. MEASURING THE LEARNING OUTCOMES OF THE LEARNERS OF "ENG. LIT."

In order to discuss the dilemma of measuring the learning outcome of the students enrolling in the 'Eng. Lit.' programmes, several debates and discussions are available. However, in this context, a reference can be made to a research conducted in Spain by the national Evaluation and Accreditation Agency in 2006, which examined, among other things, employers' expectations from the literary studies graduates that they employ. (Kayalis & Anastasia, p. 7) It was found that a large percentage of the graduate students is employed in the larger areas of 'cultural consultancy': cultural and/or touristic

management, human resources management, mass media and cultural industry, programmes for the integration of immigrants, etc. Employers in these fields require from literary studies graduates communication as well as learning skills, a capacity to apply knowledge to practice, a capacity for data analysis and synthesis, information management and problem solving skills, all of which are significantly broader than those pertaining to the interpretation and critical placing of literary texts in context, to which the discipline traditionally aims. (Kayalis & Anastasia, p. 8) Thus, the way literature (as every other discipline) is constituted is, of course, constantly changing as our circumstances and understandings change; and the boundaries between literature and the other fields are very much porous and even overlapping. Nonetheless, it was found during the research that literary-critical discourse has identifiable and distinctive purposes, objects of study and text-genres, methods of enquiry, central concepts and networks of ideas, conventional uses of evidence, and modes of written and verbal expression, with which all its participants engage. In addition, characteristic of this discipline are richly dynamic relationships between processes of textual analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. Accordingly, it is the function of a higher education in Literature to offer students the opportunity to engage in literary-critical discourse as participants in a significant socio-cultural process. This can also be one of the best examples for the policy makers of Indian distance education, as a large section of the learners annually enrol in the literature courses of the Indian open universities across the whole country, but without a proper understanding of the job prospective of such programmes.

Besides, as in case of the ODL practises in the universities of the world, the practical criteria for judging ODL in a country like India can also be made to relate to the learning outcomes that it effects. In today's situations and circumstances, 'employability' is the main idea in the Indian discourse on higher education. Thus, based on some international practices, 'Eng. Lit.' in higher education has to be vocationalised to some extent especially as it enters the new age distance education system. In the Indian situation, 'Eng. Lit.' is under tremendous pressure to submit to market-forces and thus to 'vocationalise' or to become skill-based. (Gaston, 1991, p. 11) As a part of the ODL curriculum, which sets forth the content of the traditional fare, the study of English through Distance Education has to conform to the 'exit criteria' that will be used to benchmark the Distance Education programmes offered by a University. The question of outcome assessment, when seen through the lens of literary study, then highlights particular paradoxes: "...in the liberal arts, and, particularly, in literary studies, many of the educational gains we value most may be the least tangible, the least easily measured." Gaston's commentary further continues with the following:

You say that the eleven freshmen and fourteen sophomores who took Masterpieces of World Literature have become more discerning in weighing ideas and more sensitive to the values of western culture? Prove it!...Those who teach English and the foreign languages face a dilemma in that their disciplines typically comprehend both skills training and liberal learning. While we may easily establish that a student can write a three-paragraph essay without a fragment, we may not with equal confidence be able to demonstrate that students in upper-level courses have advanced in their ability to appreciate cultural subtlety, literary nuance, or analytical balance. (Gaston, p. 11)

Such opinions, although articulated mostly within a situation outside India connect us to the larger issues that colour ODL practices in general. While the aims of ODL are specific to localised conditions, the model it provides, cover some universal objectives.

While referring to some important issues pertaining to the use of literature in Language Education, Geof Hall in his essay "Literature in Education" remarks that linguistic and literate competences are seen as crucial for full participation in a given society. Beyond this, claims are made for better cultural understanding of others, benefits for the ethical development of the individual and wider general educational benefits in terms of the development of worthier—or perhaps more critical—citizens. He states:

Literature for many broadens our notions of what it means to be human, and how we could live better as human beings. In the light of these claims for the value of literature in education, one needs to investigate how literature has been taught and learned, and why, with some examples and history, including the important postcolonial history of literature teaching. It is in local contexts, too, those participants in literary education, whether teachers, students or others, can most meaningfully participate. Finally, it is argued that cultural awareness can be promoted particularly effectively through language and literature pedagogies, since language, particularly in the kind of texts usually included in literature syllabuses, reveals much about its users and the societies they interact with, and can also be used to prompt learners' growing awareness of their own individual and cultural identities, beliefs and values. (Hall, 2005, pp. 39-40). This has been particularly relevant to the learners belonging to the post-colonial societies.

Thus, there are several ways through which one can measure the learning outcome of the learners enrolling in a course on literary studies. One only needs to first explore the myriad ways literary studies can be used to signify experiences that could further be used to form individual identities, beliefs and values.

7. CONCLUSION

It is important to note that statements about the purposes and aims of a higher education in every discipline taught in the UK take behavioural form, expressed in terms of what the students learning the discipline should achieve and the 'skills' they should acquire at the end. That is, these statements, as mentioned by Ellie Chambers in her essay "Teaching First-year Students in Open and Distance Education: Aims and Methods" concern the outcomes of the students' learning, which must be demonstrable and assessable after a stipulated period. The UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), also formulated and published 'Benchmark Statements' of subject knowledge and skills in all disciplines. These benchmarks are based on the idea that higher learning is not just a cognitive but is also a socio-cultural process. (Kayalis & Anastasia, p. 19). This is very significant, and most pertinent to note that even in a country like India, there are similar arrangements made by the University Grants Commission (UGC) which very recently has come up with some important quality mandates to be fulfilled by 2022. One of the mandates has been to, "Train the students in essential professional and soft skills such as team work, communication skills, time management skills etc., inculcate human values and professional ethics, and the spirit of innovation/entrepreneurship and critical thinking among the students and promote avenues for display of these talents." (UGC notification, 4th June 2018). So far as such mandates are not fulfilled, any of the ODL programmes offered by an Indian open university shall always remain an inherently inferior mode of teaching. To overcome these constraints we need to look for alternative models, that is, for ways that will allow us to reconceptualise ODL literary studies at some degree of independence from face-to-face teaching, to build on its specific advantages and maybe even turn into an asset what is commonly perceived as its limitation. (Kayalis & Anastasia, pp. 53-54).

Thus, based on certain visible practices in some open universities of the world, the ODL contours of literary studies shall surely provide a sustainable learning environment in which the learners can garner their ability to appreciate cultural subtlety, literary nuances or analytical balance, while also being able to fulfil their learning needs, which are essential indicators necessary for a healthy living in an integrated and cultured society.

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