Evaluation Strategies In Distance Education

Dr. Digvijay Singh
Assistant Professor ITTR, KUK

ABSTRACT
The cheapest way to pass on learning from one generation to another was by human contact till printing was invented. Changes in technology and communication provided new ways of living to many adults, if they had received relevant education. The education systems could not bear the double demand for schools and adult education and this scale of the demand necessitated alternative methods of education to reach more people economically. Distance education satisfies these demands.

Need for Evaluation in Distance Education
The concept that education is for all and can continue through adult life is being accepted more and more widely. Learning is no longer a privilege of a wealthy aristocracy. It has become the birth right of each individual to acquire as much education as one is capable of absorbing. The development of literacy, greater opportunity of leisure due to advances in technology and the change in attitude that education is a lifelong affair have increased the demand for continuing education. To meet this demand distance education is being used to solve educational problems of both quantity and quality, extending education beyond the limits of the school and college system. If it is to serve as a valuable tool in any educational crisis and play a permanent part as a parallel strategy to the regular system, it should have an in-built feedback system, both formative and summative, no matter how carefully the educational materials are prepared, they will not meet the needs or clear the doubts of all the students for whom they are intended. The system of feedback enables students who face some problems with the instructional materials to receive necessary help. Also, it provides an opportunity to the lesson writers to assess how far they have been effective in what they were trying to achieve. Thus, in-built feedback is must both for the students who cannot otherwise overcome their learning difficulties and for the instructors who cannot otherwise see how effective their teaching has been beyond that, there are ideological reasons for stressing the indispensability of feedback. Unless it is built into the system. The curriculum of distance education system assumes that the teacher is the master of all relevant knowledge and the learner’s knowledge and understanding is of no importance to the educator: Feedback, though difficult to organise is the only way of initiating dialogue between the teacher and the student in a distance education system. The educational
effectiveness and the quality of distance education which uses mass-production methods can be maintained only through in-built evaluation systems.

**Concept of Evaluation**

Evaluation is a continuous process contributing to the process of learning by enabling the learner to appreciate the strong and weak points of his own learning, through the process of learning itself and the instructional process by enabling the teacher to understand the strengths and weaknesses of his own institution through an appreciation of student responses to the same.

Ebel defined evaluation as a judgement of merit based solely on measurement provided by test scores but frequently involving the synthesis of various measurements and kinds of evidence. Tyler (1950) points out that the process of evaluation is essentially the process of determining to what extent the educational objectives are being realised by the programme. Any educational system can be conceived as comprising three conceptually distinct component-inputs, operations or processes and outputs (Austin 1965. Austin and Panos 1960) or antecedents, transactions a..d outcomes (Stake, 1967). To be maximally fruitful in decision-making, evaluation should provide information concerning all the three components and their inter-relationships. Infect, evaluation spans time and connotes some change in state occurring between the input and the output, referred to as the process as shown schematically.

**Scope of Evaluation**

The evaluation of an educational system entails decisions about the variables to be identified, the sources from which information can be tapped and the descriptive or analytical statistics to be adopted.

**What do we evaluate**

The first step in the evaluation process is the identification of the programme goals and objective, which should be definite, specific and stated in observable, measurable behavioural terms. Next the manner in which the learning experiences are provided to realise the stated objectives should be assessed, as evaluation does not confine itself to the assessment of results alone but also extends to the means adopted to reach the ends. The third step deals with the determination of the indicators which will reveal, when the programme objectives have been achieved. These steps are followed in order, by data collection, analysts, interpretations and conclusions

**Kinds of Evaluation**

Schematically the process of evaluation may be viewed as follows
**Formative/Process Evaluation**

In process evaluation, the evaluator is interested to find out how and why a programme works or does not work or how the different programme inputs can be manipulated to yield desired outcomes. It concentrates on the design and the operational components of the programme in gathering for assessment and effecting improvement. As such, it constitutes a picture of input effectiveness which identifies the strength and weakness of the programme in its design and operation during the process of suggests of improving the programme by maximising its strengths and reducing its weaknesses, by the use of appropriate alternatives. Among the different components of the distance education system, formative evaluation needs to concentrate on educational needs groups objectives of the programme, curriculum and system. Programme effects are continuous throughout the operation of the programme and formative assessment helps in improving the programme by providing feedback to persons responsible for its implementation, and identifies the potential sources of failure in the interpersonal relationships among staff and students, communication channels, material and human resources, physical facilities and time schedules.

**Summative Product Evaluation**

Summative or product evaluation (post-programme evaluation) is equivalent of outcome or impact evaluation. It is the assessment of programme effects, after the termination of the programme. Scriven (1967) used the terms 'formative' and 'summative' to refer respectively to evaluation mainly intended to help form a new curriculum and evaluation design to give a final judgement on a finished programme. The separation of process and product evaluation has the advantage that each is investigated without the confusion of uncertainty in the other. The processes are observed without doubt as to whether or not they are worthwhile in terms of outcomes. In a distance education system, the summative evaluation focuses its attention on student learning or achievement which in turn reflects, the efficacy of the system as a whole. The following model schematically describes the formative and summative evaluation of distance education system.

**Who Should Evaluate**

Size of enrolment is no doubt an index of the degree to which a programme seems worth the time of adults. Size, however, varies with economic conditions and with many factors not inherently connected with the quality of the programme. Enrolment figures can be used only as a rough index of quality.

More often than not, adult students are the customers of a distance education programme and as the adage goes, "The customer is always right". The educational process is
in essence democratic and the use of students’ opinion makes a wholesome kind of co-operative contribution to improve the learning situation. Douglass (1928) noted that there can be little doubt that student opinion is influential in all respects. Werdell (1967) considered that students had a right to evaluate teachers, as such evaluation was a part of students’ academic freedom and students’ evaluation was likely to be just, and as ‘fair’ as teachers’ evaluation of students. Students’ Evaluation of Educational Quality (SEEQ) measures nine distinct components of teaching effectiveness. Hilderbrand et.al (1971) indicated that students’ evaluation is quite reliable, correlates with student achievement and that expected sources of bias to students’ ratings have little value.

**Participant Evaluation of Distance Education- A Study**

It should be realised that growth and change might well occur in spite of the programme and this is one of the difficulties encountered in evaluation studies. Kemper (1955) feels that evaluation is one of the most difficult though one of the most important tasks facing a distance education programme and hence it is often neglected. Within the limited resources, an attempt was made to evaluate the following learning support systems of the distance education programme of Madurai-Kamaraj University, (Gomathi Mani, 1983).

**Sample**

A sample of 688, 2nd year P.G. students was selected through cluster sampling method from the three out of five contact seminars conducted in different places in Tamil Nadu. A pretested questionnaire to elicit responses on the selected variables based on their exposure and experience in the field was administered and the data was analysed using the chi square test. Enough space for free response was also provided under each category.

**Findings and Conclusions**

**Instructors**

It is the instructors who maintain the most personal and continuous contact with the learners. As such they should enhance student motivation and clarify doubts through dialogue and discussion and also provide opportunity for feed-back contributing to programme improvement. Whether they interact with students by mail, phone or in person, they are regarded as the most important part of the communication network in a distance education programme.

The teachers lacked one or more of the following skills expected of an instructor of heterogeneous adult learners:

- mastery of subject-matter and fluent communication,
- efficiency in clearing doubts,
- skill in motivating adults,
- use of various teaching methods,
- proper modulation/pronunciation/accent,
- Maintaining in-built discipline.
Radio Broadcasts
Distance educations are a land of contrasts and nowhere are these more evident than in the technology used. Radio is the only media used in our sample. Lessons are broadcast on all days between 10.30-10.50 p.m. from Station B of AIR. The following difficulties were encountered in listening to the broadcasts.
- Timing inconvenient, morning or evening preferred.
- Duration increased on holidays.
- Broadcast from Station a preferred.
- Script should be sent well in advance.
- Variety of methods such as dialogue, discussion, quiz and question answer sessions, etc. should be used.

Study Centres
Study centres are very few and ill equipped. They expect the study centres to have the following amenities:
- every district should have a study centre;
- they should contain a full-fledged library, radio, audio tapes, T.V. and video-cassettes;
- a full time instructor for academic and administrative counselling;
- and
- should be open from 10.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m.

Internal Evaluation
Formative evaluation conducted by the Institute forms the basis for internal evaluation. The suggestions given for the conduct of internal evaluation were:
- provision of model questions,
- short tests after each seminar,
- more objective type questions, and
- one model examination prior to the final examination.

Contact Seminar
The group contact can play humanizing, motivating and instructional roles in a distance learning system. The following suggestions were offered regarding the conduct of the contact seminar:
- It should not be very far away from the residence of the learners.
- More seminars needed to complete the syllabus, and the daily duration of the seminar should not be more than 4 to 5 hours.
- One/two week long seminars were preferred to weekend seminars as the former could provide continuity.
- More centres were needed to reduce the strength in each centre.
- Classrooms should have enough accommodation, proper ventilation and lighting.

Text Books
In distance education, the reliance on texts as the primary mode of learning is even greater than in the traditional programmes. But the general opinion among the students is that text books or reference books are not at all necessary and the study units are self-sufficient. But some students feel that a well-equipped library is a must to enable them to do reference work when they find lesson units insufficient. They want the text books to be supplied on loan.

**Response Sheets**

Good feed-back is that which is immediate, regular and explanatory rather than judgemental and concise. Success of the programme depends on prompt delivery and fast turnaround of the assignments. Distance learning lacks the immediate feed-back provided in the classroom, which enables the students to assess their success in relation to their peers. Besides, a vast majority of students need individual advice, support and mediation. This is done successfully through the response sheets. In order to facilitate this function of the response sheets, the suggestions provided were:

- Immediate correction with constructive comments and return without delay.
- Application oriented assignments which prevent mere copying.
- Permission to submit them during contact seminars.

**Efficient Study Material**

Study material should be attractive and stimulating and pedagogically sound in all respects. It should not be too complicated to discourage the student at first sight. A more simple and less elegant design is more inviting. Most of the learners are not accustomed to serious study. This fact should not be overlooked by the lesson writers, for the course material serves as a text book and a teacher at one and the same time. Hence, self-controlling and challenging exercises with the dual purpose of making demands and at the same time spurring the student should be given. The suggestions offered for its efficiency are:

- Should be sent in one lot/in a serial before the seminar to enable better participation.
- Proper proof-reading needed to eliminate mistakes in spelling, grammar, figures and diagrams.
- Language should be simple and easy to comprehend.
- Exercises for self-evaluation must be given at the end of each unit.

**Conclusion**

If the distance education system is to function effectively, each component of the system should be appropriately designed for its purpose and all the parts should be properly articulated to make a coherent and logical whole. Students at a distance should be provided a complete and well balanced educational experience from pre-enrolment counselling to post graduation stages.

The ultimate realities of distance education should open an era of unlimited learning opportunities to all.

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