

Interview

Professor Malashri Lal, Joint Director, University of Delhi-South Campus, and Coordinator (English Courses) Institute of Lifelong Learning in a candid interview to Prem Kumari Srivastava, shares her experiences and challenges of setting up the E-Learning Centre at South Campus. In her words, 'immense reciprocity between language and literature' and 'interdisciplinarity and sharing of knowledge bases' is the hall mark of this centre.



PKS: Why do you think in the past few years, a need was felt to focus on e-learning in education in general and with special reference to the University of Delhi in particular?

ML: E-Learning in education is extremely important as it is the only method through which we can reach out to a large number of students. In the present day education system in India, one is not able to provide a good student-teacher ratio. The student population is enormous and often teachers are not able to cope with their varied needs. In such a situation, e-learning and e-lessons are the only way to link effectively with this majority. Also, there is a flexibility of access to the e-lectures/lessons. In face-to-face learning, a student can never really 'go back' to the classroom; at best s/he can indulge in a discussion with friends or rely on peer notes. The greatest contribution of e-learning is the possibility of 'knowledge retrieval'. The student can read, listen or see the lecture again and again.

PKS: When the University of Delhi,

South Campus decided to start the e-learning Centre, what was your vision and what did you wish to accomplish?

ML: The Vice Chancellor and others that he consulted had already put in careful thought and planning. At the South Campus, the Director UDSC and I did not wish to duplicate the pedagogy of the classroom or repeat the work undertaken at ILLL north campus. Keeping in view the requirements of a majority of DU students, our focus turned on the BA Programme. Teaching material for such students was limited and we also realized they needed bi-lingual instruction.

PKS: As Coordinator for English Courses, you set out to focus on English Language courses. You were also looking at a different module, one that would cater to students at the basic as well as intermediate level. Thus, you supported a course which was based on the University of Delhi texts but also independent of them as it focused on language skills (reading, writing, speaking and

listening), grammar and vocabulary rather than pure literary content. Please comment.

ML: What you are saying is exceedingly important. Yes, there is a text that is a fixed entity on the printed page. In the e-learning way of teaching language, this text can be made to function in numerous ways. Adaptability of the lesson is much higher. As you and others in your team have done, you have created language-learning lessons in an interactive mode. At places you have even used the language in a linguistically 'erroneous' manner: the way it figures in hoardings, at traffic junctions or behind buses and trucks, to teach the correct use of English. This has brought the language-learning experience closer to a student's everyday life.

PKS: Can you comment on the challenges that you faced in conceptualizing this e-learning centre at South Campus?

ML: The biggest challenge was and has been the technology. The faculty who accepted the responsibility of creating e-lessons at the South Campus, including you and me, were teachers and educational professionals who did not have advanced training in technology. Yes, workshops and training sessions on MOODLE and other platforms were organized but most of my colleagues learned the basics and improved their skills by the trial and error method. ILLL requires technical experts, full time professionals who will transfer the academic lessons to the desired technical platform. We are still trying to build in such technical support.

PKS: What relationship do you envisage between face-to-face learning and e-learning?

ML: A unique synchronicity exists between the two. In fact, there is a vital connection; the e-lessons are a complement and not a substitute to face-to-face learning. Let me

elaborate this a little further. The same teachers who address the students in colleges are invited to ILLL to write the lessons. This improves the quality of the lessons manifold because of the transmissions from class activity to the value addition on the computer screen. There is a cycle of learning generated which I see as one of the greatest contributions of the University of Delhi.

PKS: How is e-learning different from what is traditionally called distance learning?

ML: The approach to education keeps changing. If IGNOU started Distance Learning, the University of Delhi had its School for Correspondence, and now the Campus of Open Learning. At one time people saw a sharp divide between distance learning and e-learning. In distance learning the idea of 'distance' actually weighs on your mind and 'learning' is associated with impersonal instruction; it is primarily postal learning. I remember heaps and heaps of lessons/booklets being mailed out from distance learning centres. In e-learning, the teacher and the taught come together in a technology supported, virtual learning environment.

PKS: You are absolutely right, but there is an apprehension among teachers that e-learning, which is primarily self learning, will eventually replace teachers, probably the way robots and machines are replacing man. Do you think that this fear is well-founded?

ML: Absolutely not. This will never happen. If we look at the history of e-learning, there is immense exchange and reciprocity. It has the capability of self enhancement. It is a complementary method. Through a single e-mail query to the teacher, the student is connected. In e-learning, the student and the teacher are in a different kind of a communication with each other. In fact there can

be better interchange between the teacher and learner than in a crowded classroom. I wouldn't use the word 'self learning' for the e-mode because the teacher is always 'present' even if this is through technology.

PKS: That's true Professor Lal. I guess, in the wake of this, the e-learning pundits propounded the theory that e-lessons can supplement and complement teaching and help teachers with their pedagogy. But the detractors say that this was a conciliatory strategy to placate the teaching community. Is it true?

This is the language of politics, not education. Let us accept that in India, we must take education to as many students as possible. It is important that these students are given 'standardized education', in the sense that benchmarks of quality are equally upheld in diverse areas in India. It is an 'accident of destiny' that some students are sitting in university classrooms listening to teachers, while there are many more sitting elsewhere who are equally capable of receiving this education. We are a central university and offer an opportunity to all who apply for a place. We admit a pre-determined number. It is only through e-learning that is upgradable all the time, that the larger system can hope to fulfil the GOI, goals of granting 'access, equity and justice' in education.

PKS: This brings me to the issue of student feedback in India which is most unstructured and non-evaluative of the teacher's pedagogy as also content. In the e-learning mode, student feedback is a very important component which eventually becomes the tool to augment the content too. Has the e-material that has been created at ILLL been able to achieve this objective?

ML: There is no 'official' feedback from students though space has been provided for volunteering comments. To your question, my response will be somewhat individual. I have

observed that, culturally, students/young people in India hesitate to give a 'feedback.' This is not simply in educational environments but in the general 'body politic' of India. We are brought up to respect older people and seniors, and 'feedback' is understood as unwarranted criticism. However, through informal student discussions in canteens, blogs, social networking sites such as ORKUT and Facebook, academic evaluation of teachers and courses happen. Currently e-lessons on the university website seldom receive official feedback. But in the 'work-in-progress workshops' held at ILLL South Campus, participating students recorded their feedback in the forms provided. It helped that 'anonymous feedback' was taken. The lack of academic feedback and user data worries me. There is a kind of enigmatic silence.

PKS: What are the innovative methods of evaluation used in e-learning?

ML: Due to the large student population, systematic evaluation methods are taking time to evolve. Individual lessons often have quizzes and multiple choice questions which can help evaluation processes. But we are yet to position a comprehensive evaluation package. As a beginning, I would like to suggest a pilot project of the kind used by social scientists. Target a few students at a time. Evolve a scientifically designed, data enabled, computer generated analysis and evaluation system, and ground-test the results. The use of technology comes in here.

PKS: Globally, Open University, UK, MIT (USA) and several other recognized centres of distance education and open learning have successfully used the interactive e-learning mode to serve the cause of education. How about plans to set up collaborations or consultative projects with such centres?

ML: The University of Delhi has already been interacting through its UKEIRI programme with the Open University, UK. Some lessons in English language were also made in the collaborative mode. However, one should keep in mind that our target audience and prime learners are our own students in India and, for now, specifically those at DU. About 3 lakh students are enrolled, out of which about half do not come to regular classes as they are in the “open” categories. Let us reach them first.

PKS: In what ways are the e-learning courses in English prepared at the ILL, UDSC likely to help the student community significantly?

ML: In the traditional learning environment, departments and disciplines remain in watertight confines. At ILL, interdisciplinarity happens effortlessly. The knowledge content and pedagogy in English lessons reflect examples from several walks of life such as film, media, commerce, travel, simple science. Animations and visuals add attractive dimensions. English therefore becomes functional, lively and relational. Students say they gain confidence in using the language—that is a huge compliment, don't you think?

PKS: That's true. Could you suggest what more needs to be done in the e-learning courses to make teaching/learning of literature in English more enjoyable and meaningful?

ML: While the e-lessons often melt the barrier between language and literature teaching, I think literary texts are usefully illustrated in the e-mode. Lesson writers have regularly introduced photos of authors and their times to enhance the understanding of historical references for example. Interviews with authors such as Salman Rushdie are hyperlinked to create the excitement of hearing his words and voice. Poems are read out, bringing emotions to the fore and explaining complex issues such as rhyme and metre. We can do even more with the enormous tools of technology-aided learning.

PKS: What is the ‘way forward’ now?

ML: ILL has completed its initial three years. Like a healthy child, it is walking steadily, but will take some time to be “up and running.” At the South Campus, effective and innovative lessons have been created in English, Commerce and Maths so far. You were part of that process and we continue to expand our base in English. We are now moving into new subjects: Science, Computers,

Hindi, Political Science. The BA/BSc courses in which material is scarce, remain our priority. Our important new initiative is to have the lessons translated into Hindi. Moreover, video lectures and interviews have been recorded in courses such as ‘Social Enquiry’ and ‘Film Studies’. You will be happy to know that eminent persons such as Gulzar, Alice Walker and Jayanta Mahapatra have been recorded in conversation with the ILL faculty. This is valuable and original teaching material in the e-mode. The ‘way forward’ is to give publicity to the material and have lessons uploaded on the ILL website for easy access by all students and teachers of the University of Delhi.

PKS: Professor Lal, this discussion has been extremely informative and relevant in the current context when both the government and academia are focused on imparting quality education to the masses in which e-learning stands at the center. Your observations are fully in sync with the thematic thrust on ‘E-Learning’ of this issue of FORTELL. It has indeed been a pleasure talking to you.



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