

## ETHICAL AND VALUE SENSITIZATION THROUGH OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

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### ABSTRACT

Spreading of Ethics and Values in the Society is an inherent activity of Education system. Distance Education (DE) being the latest form of Education, it is quite natural that DE also has to spread Ethics and Values in the Society. Some characteristic features of DE facilitate its role in this activity. This article discusses these issues.

**Keywords:** Ethics, values, sensitization, ODL.

### INTRODUCTION

We, the people entered 21<sup>st</sup> Century with more globalisation and dissolution of frontiers. The physical frontiers might be existing but, the cultural, economic, business and educational frontiers are dissolving. Natural barriers are no longer insulating a country from rest of the world.

In this globalisation, there is growing interdependence of people. This global integration leads to importance of Ethics, which are universally acceptable. Of course, this has been the practice in human society, since age-old times, as Ethics and value system evolved in human society over millions of years.

With globalisation, irrespective of place of cause, irrespective of good or bad, the effects are felt all over. Tsunami is a natural disaster originated in Far East and affected many countries. Man made disasters like collapse of Enron, will affect people at far off countries also. These man made disasters can be reduced to a large extent by increasing ethical sensitivity of people. Kidder (2005) stated that *the most basic and crucial step in making an ethical decision is to recognize that the issue in hand is in fact an ethical issue.*

A lack of this awareness causes more ethical failings than muddled values and misplaced reasoning combined. Hence, this ethical sensitivity of people, which relates to one's awareness that his/her actions can affect welfare of others, is very crucial for the peaceful progress of the global society.

Since ancient times, Education has been an effective medium for spreading Ethics and Values in the Society, besides knowledge spread. Now a days Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has spread across the Globe and is well established as supplementary and complementary to Conventional Education. So ODL also has to contribute in spreading Ethics and Values in the Society.

In this regard, Johnson Jr. (1992) stated that a Distance Education Institute should mean that it is a University and not merely an information dispensing network or an Agency for skill development. He further argued that we can implement the task of fulfilling the moral and ethical work that distinguishes education from mere information and training through Distance Education, even though the methodologies were not certainly specified.

Later Deb Gearhart (2001) discussed how to look at the Distance Education policies in an Ethical manner. Earlier in 1990, Reed and Thomas (1990) discussed various issues in Distance Learning, that need ethical sensitivity among those who are involved in this activity. Except very few such articles, the Distance Education literature is scanty of this ethical sensitization topic. This article intends to discuss the historical aspects of this issue in reference to ODL, the advantages of ODL in comparison to conventional mode and few practices in vogue.

#### **ETHICS THROUGH EDUCATION**

Education can be viewed as the transmission of values and accumulated knowledge of the society. In primitive cultures, education was more informal and was of enculturation. (Encyclopedia Britannica). With societies growing more complex and also the growing complexity in the knowledge to be passed on, school/ college system has come in. In this process, teaching and learning, things out of context have become prevalent. With knowledge explosion, education has been restricted to transmission of filtered knowledge, leaving aside the human values (Sivaswaroop 2004a). This has led to preparation of specialists who are poorly connected both to their neighbours and to their surroundings. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1949), Former President of India opined, "If society is not to disintegrate into an aggregate of individual specialists, we should endow the youth with a central code of values, transmit to them a cultural heritage. It alone can serve as a cohesive force in a society, which is getting splintered by one's specialization".

In the Report submitted to UNESCO by the International Commission on Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century entitled "Learning:

The Treasure Within", four foundations or pillars of education were reported *viz.*

- learning to know,
- learning to do,
- learning to live together, and
- learning to be.

Present education is emphasizing more on first point, little on second point, but almost nil on third and fourth aspects. But in the globalising society, multi-dimensional capabilities are required. As stated by Sir Christopher Ball, 21<sup>st</sup> Century needs a flexible generalist rather than a specialist. The flexible generalists are persons equipped with necessary levels of knowledge, skills and values to adjust readily to different job settings and life situations (Gnanam 2002). For multi-dimensional or whole development of an individual, it is essential that one should be educated in values also. Value education is education in values and education towards inculcating values. This value inculcation should be part of a shared curriculum rather than an exclusive curriculum (Dave 2001).

Even though there can be direct method, in which fixed periods in classes are specified for moral/ value instructions. But the essence of values is to be realized and appreciated, rather than being learnt (*Sharma 2001*). Value education should be learnt, re-learnt and reinforced throughout life. In other words, it is a life-long process.

Thus education institutions should be lighthouses for giving value orientation to their students and through them, to the society. As such teaching is regarded as a noble profession and teachers are highly regarded for their ethical behaviour (Sivaswaroop 2005). It is proved even in a survey in which US public ranked the ethical practices of various professions as very good or somewhat good. Teachers topped the list with 90 per cent followed by journalists at 74 per cent (Institute of Global Ethics, 2005).

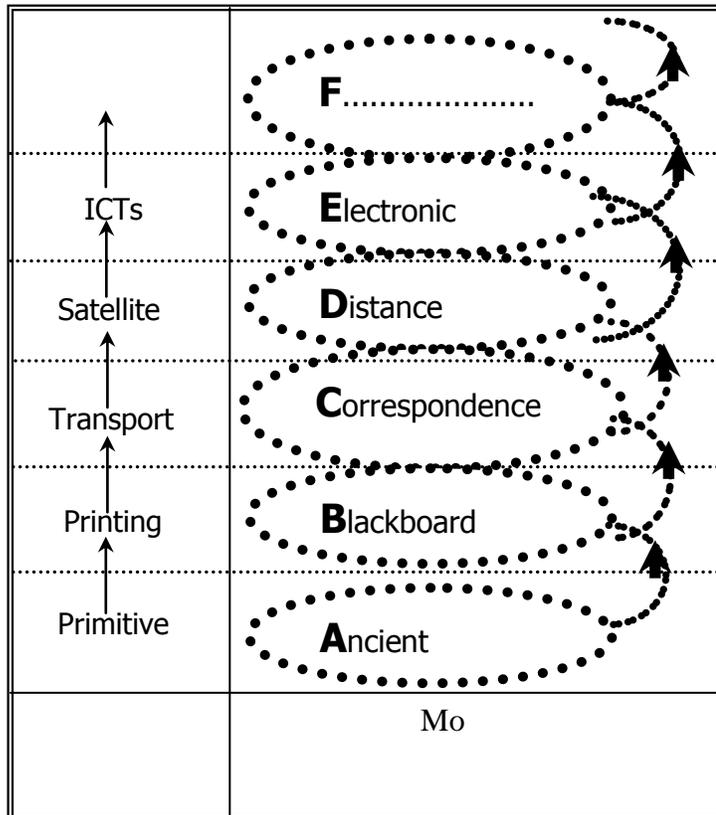
Now let us see how education has been traversing its path through ages in achieving its objectives.

#### **Education–The Journey**

Educational system is dynamic and changes with time. It responds to the demands of the society, by assimilating the advances in technology. This assimilation of technology leads to a new mode of education. It is diagrammatically represented in a spiral model as follows (*Sivaswaroop 2003*): The demand to increase access to education is two fold: one is from increasing population in the formal educational age group and second is in the “life long learners” driven by knowledge explosion and competition in professional life.

These have led education to move out of classrooms and to enter workplaces, drawing rooms, etc. in the form of Distance Education. It has become open, freed from the four walls of the classrooms.

But it is becoming into an internationally traded commodity and large number of global education providers is emerging. In true sense, education is not a product to be sold and bought in an academic market (Philips, 2002).



**Technology Based Growth of Education System**

Aim of education is to help students develop into highly evolved and morally oriented human beings (vide infra). As stated by Swami Vivekananda "Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in the man". That implies education has to sensitize students about their capabilities existing in them. Let us see how ODL system can fulfill this criterion with special reference to ethical and moral values.

**ADVANTAGES OF ODL IN ETHICAL AND VALUE SENSITIZATION**

ODL system has come through different stages and is now well accepted as an established system of providing knowledge and skills in various faculties. Globally, its importance in educating the body of the society is steadily increasing. Now ODL system has to emphasize on ethical and value sensitization to its learners. It has to emphasize on "learning to be" and "learning to live together" aspects of education, as stated in the UNESCO report.

Compared to Conventional Education system, ODL has certain advantages in developing this Ethical sensitization. They are as follows:

An average ODL learner, especially in higher education is an adult. And so, already matured enough about ethics and values. So, what he/ she needs is sensitization on these issues, which are applicable in present day global society. For example, the remedy of communal fanaticism and hatred lies obviously not in banning religions from the sphere of education, but in enlightening the people about the correct and authentic information of the fundamentals of their religions and other religions (Swami Nirvedananda, 2002). In all probability a matured person can be properly sensitized, compared to an immature person. As stated by Kidder surprising number of ethical collapses is directly from a lack of this ethical awareness (2005). ODL system targets the individual learner. The personal contact with peer group is minimized, of course it may have negative pedagogic effects, but it has a positive implication for moral sensitization. When people are away from the peer group influence, his/her own self can be sensitized to the moral values. For example, the truck drivers at a resting point on the high way are overwhelmed with the machismo climate at those points. But when they are driving alone, they are away from this environment and are free from any external peer group influences. Audiocassettes can be used for sensitizing the truck drivers about family values, abstinence, etc (Sivaswaroop 2004b).

Similarly, an employee or businessman can be swayed by the corrupt climate (*if any*) in his/ her working surroundings. But, when he/ she is alone, he/ she can be effectively sensitized about moral values and responsible behaviour, than when he/she was in the company of any corrupt colleagues. ODL works in these individual situations only. Increasing usage of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) help this one to one or one to many communications. So it can be more effective. Another advantage is the numbers. The number of ODL learners is increasing very fast. Thus the outreach potential of ODL is very high. The most valuable point is that with advances of technology, the best available methods can reach to any number of learners across the globe, with minimum efforts and cost.

Value sensitization has to be learnt, re-learnt and reinforced throughout one's whole lifetime. Unless value learning is made a life long process, values will not survive and values will not become functional (Dave 2001). For life long learning, ODL is the best suitable method. Thus ODL is advantageous in ethical and value sensitization in following aspects.

- ODL learners are matured enough to be sensitized effectively.
- ODL targets an individual learner, when he/ she is alone *i.e.* when away from peer group influences, where his/ her "own" self prevails.
- Increasing large numbers and cost effectiveness.
- ODL is best suitable for the life long learning of values and their sensitization.

Let us see how the existing ODL system is working in this direction and the future potential.

## **EXISTING PRACTICES**

In case of student in a conventional education, he/she is influenced by the personality and behaviour of teacher, the school atmosphere. The students assimilate the model of teacher placed before them, as teacher is ideal for them. Views and perceptions of a cross section of students were obtained on qualities of a good teacher (Sengupta, 2003). He reported that the major focus of student was directed to personal values and attributes of the teacher viz. punctuality, regularity, who maintain discipline. In Distance Education, as teacher is away from student, the institution should emulate these values. The whole environment of the institution should be value-oriented. The principles and policies followed by institutions are more influencing on the learner.

According to the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and Mother on education principles, "the mind has to be consulted in its own growth". The child is to be consulted in what he will learn and how he will learn (Tripathi 2001). In ODL, this is exactly followed.

The learner has a choice to choose courses of his/ her own interest and study at his/ her pace, place and convenience. It reflects the choice of options and scope for alternative thinking than being fixed in a closed way. It helps to develop self-thinking or if needed, to listen to others' advice and decision-making.

ODL system takes opportunities of education to places and people hitherto unreached, transcending social, economic and geographic barriers and provides "equality of opportunity" and "equity" (Murugan 1996 p.24). Thereby elevating confidence in disadvantaged sections of society that they have been provided the same level of education hitherto available to the privileged sections.

In a classroom, whatever the teacher teaches is in many ways private. It cannot be reviewed at a later stage. The students are most likely to be influenced by the biased opinion of the teachers, in some cases. Whereas in ODL, the materials are prepared by a team of experts and so less biased version. Also the material once produced, is open for public inspection. Thus, an ODL learner is more exposed to an unbiased knowledge than a conventional student. Thus ODL is more transparent in curriculum transaction and with a scope for correction (Murugan 1996 p.11).

In ODL, a learner has to develop skills of self-study, self-thinking, managing time, attending time schedules and moreover being self-responsible for all these. These will enhance self-confidence of the learner. Another essential feature in ODL is the writing skills, as one has to understand and write assignments, examinations, etc. This inherently develops the clarity in thinking!

The Academic Counselors come into contact with learners for a short period. Even then, the personal qualities of a counselor viz. warmth, acceptance, genuineness and empathy can influence the learners. With increasing usage of ICTs, the frequency of interaction between teacher and taught increase. So the personal qualities of teachers do have impact on shaping the learners' ethical sensitivity.

**In Distance Education, Assignments have pedagogic significance in addition to evaluative contribution. The evaluator has to write marginal and global comments. They have to suggest the learner, his/ her weakness/ strength, the deficiencies, the dishonesty (*if any*) observed. That means, if the matter is copied from study material or copied from his/ her fellow learners. Evaluators are trained to mention the specific point and give a lower grade.**

**Such academic dishonesty is reported in regular schools by Fass (1990). He reported that informal polls showed that as many as three quarters of students on campuses, admitted to some sort of academic fraud. Conditions like time limits, competition among peer group, etc may force students to such dishonesty. Even though flexibility in Distance Education helps to reduce such stress, but still there is an increased concern of faculty of teaching at a distance—that the distance student doing the work is indeed the student enrolled and that the student is not cheating (Deb Gearhart, 2001). To curtail such practices some of the methods in vogue in Author's experience at Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) are as follows:**

**The students are advised to submit assignments in handwriting only. Printouts are discouraged. This will discourage even the downloaded assignment responses. At one Study Centre, the Coordinator has compared the handwritings of the student and that of assignment submitted by her. Both are different! Then the student conceded she got it written by her friend! The alertness of the Coordinator has sent a signal to all students!**

**Even in the handwritten assignments, evaluators compare the answers and if copying observed between assignments of two different students, they write the comment that it appears to be copied and give lower grade. Generally this happens when both students are in relation like wife and husband, boss and subordinate, colleagues, etc. Similar is the case with, when they copy the study material!**

**Nowadays with availability of solutions on Internet or proxy writers, the problem is increasing. So, recently Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has started conducting Viva-Voce exam for assignments of certain Programmes. The viva-voce has compulsory pass marks; otherwise the student cannot get through the exam. Here also the genuine students get through. During viva, some students fail and they accept their ingenuity. They are advised to repeat next time.**

**Students with genuine reasons are given some more time for submission of assignments, so that because of time pressure, they should not subscribe to wrong methods! Thus a layered approach is made to sensitize students, to behave honestly!**

**The students are repeatedly informed about procedures, dates, assignments, exams, etc in both medium of instruction *viz.* English and Hindi. Deb Gearhart (2001) states that providing information to the learners, over and over again is critical for ethical behaviour of a learner. IGNOU students are informed through Handbooks, Programme Guides, Introduction Letters, Induction Meetings, Counseling Sessions Letters, through Face-to-Face, Telephone, Radio Counselings, Interactive Teleconference Sessions and TV/ Radio Broadcasts.**

During beginning of exam sessions, students were openly informed about unfair means booking procedures and consequences. It is generally observed that IGNOU students being employed do not prefer such unfair means, planning that if failed, they can take subsequent exam. This idea is facilitated by the Open University philosophy of neither supplementary nor compartmental pass of the students. It is generally accepted that good practices will serve as ethical guidelines and such ethical policies automatically send a cue to learners. Such good practices mainly depend on those who implement it. Thus the policies be percolated across top to bottom of the organisation, so that the entire system reverberates with the ethical principles. An ethical culture has to be developed besides the compliance culture. But in a rush to compete in providing education through distance, many institutions are doing distance courses that neither take into consideration the pedagogy nor the proper use of technology (Deb Gearhart, 2001). This is true across the globe. Alert Administration work to curtail such practices. Few examples of such cases are as follows:

The United States (US) Department of Education launched a searchable database of recognized schools. It was created in response to calls for action from Congress in 2004 following revelations about high level Government officials having questionable Degrees and concerns that Diploma mills are using the internet to deceive would be students. Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine), the Chair of Government Affairs Committee said "Our investigations have shown that Diploma mills not only cheat students of their money by giving them useless Degrees, they also end up scamming the Federal Government and Business, that may hire workers who hold these bogus Diplomas" ([www.wirednews.com](http://www.wirednews.com) retrieved on 18.02.05). Such practices are widespread. Even in India, senior officials of an Open University are removed by the Chancellor for lukewarm response to unethical practices (*Hindustan Times, December, 2004*). Similarly, when Government of Chhattisgarh (East-Central India) imposed minimum benchmarking for the private Universities, several of them closed themselves. And some have been up for outright sale/ purchase by interested parties. Even the media publicity about the sub-standard practices, has reduced student inflow to such institutions and made their sustenance difficult (*Hindustan Times, November, 2004*).

## CONCLUSIONS

In tune with the traditions embedded in education system, ODL also has to inculcate ethical and value sensitization to its learners. As such ethical sensitization is vital to avoid many outbreaks in society. ODL has its own advantages in creating this awareness. Many of the existing practices of ODL, as part of shared curriculum, sends positive messages in this direction. In addition, value-oriented quotations and case studies be incorporated in the study material at appropriate places. This found to be a valid activity in author's experience, when he pursued Diploma in HIV and Family Education (DAFE) through Distance Mode. These value driven activities of the institution be reflected in each sphere. Then only the learner, when he/ she comes into contact with the organization and faces situations, will learn. This is the incidental approach of value education referred by Shastri (2001). For this, the entire institution should be ethically oriented. When there are plethora of global Distance Education Institutes with commercial motives entering, some may feel ethics may be out of place.

But, ethics is useful for those who desire for longstanding in the field. By following ethical principles, the institutions themselves become role models for their learners and also achieve their desired goals!

**Author Note:** Initial version of this article is presented at ICDE 2005, New Delhi, This is developed version of the main idea since 2005.

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