

Online Learning Experiments and Experiences through Google Groups: A Case of M.A. Education Programme of IGNOU during Covid-19 Pandemic

Niradhar Dey

Programme Coordinator, M.A. Education, Associate Professor, School of Education,
Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi
Email: niradhar@ignou.ac.in

Abstract

This paper is on online Google Groups of the first year learners of the M.A. Education programme of IGNOU who has enrolled in the January 2020 session. During the Covid-19 Pandemic lockdown period, it was difficult to continue the regular curriculum transaction strategy of the programme. It is therefore, an online Google Group for the learners was specially created for providing programme-related information, induction to the programme, addressing various support services and learning needs of the learners as well as to acquainting them with many operational issues. It was thought to use the online Google Groups platform as their number was huge, i.e. 1452 and they were spread across India in almost all the Regional Centres and also in a few overseas centres. The online Google Group was started on 30th March 2020. The article has been prepared based upon the two week experience of the programme coordinator on operating the Google group, i.e. from 1-15 April 2020.

In a single platform of online Google Groups, individual learner queries, various support services and the learning needs of the newly enrolled learners have been addressed very successfully. Data revealed that the learners had successfully accessed the hyperlinks based documents like Self Learning Materials (SLMs), Assignment Questions, PowerPoint presentations, Audio-Video Materials, Term End Examination question papers, Teleconferencing & Interactive Radio Counselling sessions, and have also acquainted themselves with many other operational issues of the programme by using the online Google Groups. In practice of only two weeks through the online Google Groups, this has been realised that the learners had successfully acquainted with the programme and had engaged in studies like writing their assignment responses, participated in discussion forums on various themes and also engaged in peer and group learning processes. It was no doubt a successful experiment of the programme during the Covid-19 Pandemic period and also an eye-opener for the programme coordinators to make it an important part of programme transaction for the future.

Keywords: Online Learning, Google Groups, Self-Learning Materials, Teleconferencing and Interactive Radio Counselling.

M.A. Education Programme of IGNOU: An Introduction

Indira Gandhi National Open University has been offering a Master of Arts (Education) programme since 2008 across India and also in a few overseas Study Centres. This is one of the popular

programmes of IGNOU. It receives around 3500 enrolment (approximate) in a year (including both January and July sessions). In the January 2020 session, a total of 1452 learners (including India and Overseas centres) had been enrolled in the M.A. Education programme

(IGNOU SRD, 2020). This programme prepares a group of professionals every year, who are well equipped with a systemic and contemporary knowledge base of education and various educational discourses. The objectives of the programme are to provide learning experiences which will enable students to understand and appreciate knowledge structures and paradigms of education; to develop professionals for effective participation in educational actions in different areas of education; and to create a community of scholars adequately equipped for participation in educational discourses (M.A. Education Programme Guide, 2008).

As per the UGC Regulations, M.A. Education is a two-year master's degree programme. This programme is of total credit of 68 in which the learners study 34 credits each in the first and the second year of the programme. In the first year of the programme, all courses taught are compulsory, which includes basic, core and knowledge generation courses, whereas, in the second year of the programme, courses in specialised areas of education and dissertation are taught. The structure of the two-year M.A. (Education) programme is as follows:

Table-1: Structure of M.A. (Education) programme

Nature of the Course	Title of the Course	Course Credit
First Year		
Basic Course on Education (Compulsory)	MES-011 Understanding Education	4
Core Courses (Compulsory)	MES-012 Education: Nature and Purposes	6
	MES-013 Learning, Learner and Development	6
	MES-014 Societal Context of Education	6
	MES-015 Operational Dimensions of Education	6
Courses on Knowledge Generation in Education (Compulsory)	MES-016 Educational Research	6
Total Credits (First Year)		34
Second Year		
Courses on Knowledge Generation in Education (Compulsory)	MESP-001 Dissertation	10

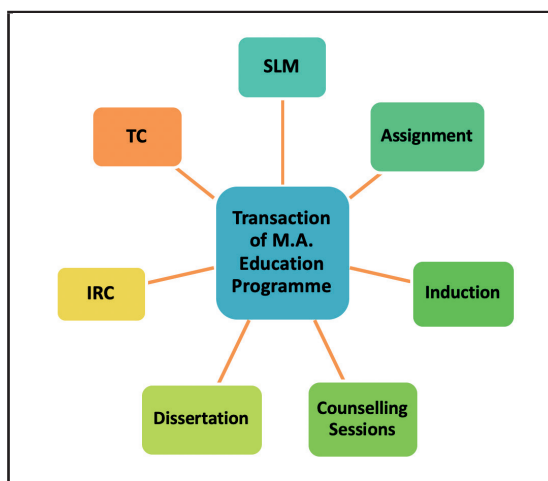
Specialises areas in Education (Optional) (Learners have to select any one area among the five specialised areas and study all the courses included in that area. Each specialised area is having 24 credit courses)	Higher Education (four courses, six credit each)	24
	Distance Education (five courses. Three courses are four credit each and two courses are 6 credit each)	24
	Educational Technology (four courses, six credit each)	24
	Educational Management (four courses, six credit each)	24
	Adult Education (four courses, six credit each)	24
Total Credits (Second Year)		34
Total Credits (Both First and Second Year)		68

The programme is offered in English medium whereas the learners can write Assignments, Term End Examination and dissertation proposal and report both in English and Hindi languages.

The programme is offered in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode. Keeping

in view the nature of the programme, learning needs of the learners, a well-defined transaction strategy has been implemented to transact the programme. The following transaction strategies have been adopted to implement the programme (see Figure 1).

Figure-1: Transaction Strategies of M.A. Education Programme



(Note: TC – Teleconferencing, IRC – Interactive Radio Counselling, SLM – Self Learning Material)

Figure-1 explains a detailed curriculum transaction strategy of the M.A. Education programme. A complete package of quality Self-Learning Materials is provided to the learners. Induction as well as counselling sessions are conducted for the learners at the concerned Study Centres and Regional Centres. For developing research skills among the learners, a dissertation component has been incorporated into the programme during the second year of the programme. The course-wise assignment is also one of the important components for continuous learning and assessment of the students which contributes 30 per cent weightage for the courses. Term-end examination which is conducted twice a year, in June and December carries 70 per cent weightage for evaluation of the courses. For direct interaction with the learners, regular teleconferencing and interactive radio counselling sessions are also conducted by using Gyandarshan - 1 TV Channel and FM Radio. Apart from these, audio-video programmes are also made available to the learners at the Study Centre level for their study.

The above are the regular transaction strategies used for implementing the programme from the teachers to the learners. The above transaction strategies of the curriculum are followed in a three-tier system, i.e. at the IGNOU main campus, Regional Centres and the Study Centres. Over the years, the programme has effectively offered to thousands of learners by using the above curriculum transaction methodologies. It has proved that the objectives of the programme for developing a knowledge base in education as well as acquainting the learners in various educational discourses have been achieved. Let us discuss the strategies adopted to transact the programme during the Covid-19 Pandemic period.

Transaction of M.A. Education Programme during Covid-19 Pandemic Period

The Covid-19 Pandemic was initially started in late December 2019. It spread across the world within a very short period. The World Health Organisation declared a global public health emergency on January 30, 2020. On March 11, 2020, WHO declared the Covid-19 outbreak a Pandemic (WHO, 2020). By April 2, 2020, the world passes 1 million Covid-19 infections. Keeping in view the effect of the pandemic over the globe, most countries across the world restricted travel of all means (both international and domestic) and many countries have locked down their markets, business establishments, educational and other institutions and migration of people from one place to another, etc.

Keeping in view the global effect of the Covid-19 Pandemic, India had also taken measures to curb the situation and not to reach at the stage of community transmission. India is a country with more than 1.38 billion (approximately) of population spread in both urban and rural demography. Still many cases have been registered and both the Union and State Governments have taken adequate measures to stop spreading the infection in the community. The following important measures have been taken to stop the infection of the Covid -19 Pandemic in India.

- The government declared a Janata Curfew on 22nd March across the Country from 7.00 am to 9.00 pm.
- All international and domestic flights have been banned from March 2020 onwards.
- Domestic Train services have been banned since the complete lockdown period. All educational and other institutions including all types of offices and business

establishments have been closed during the lockdown period.

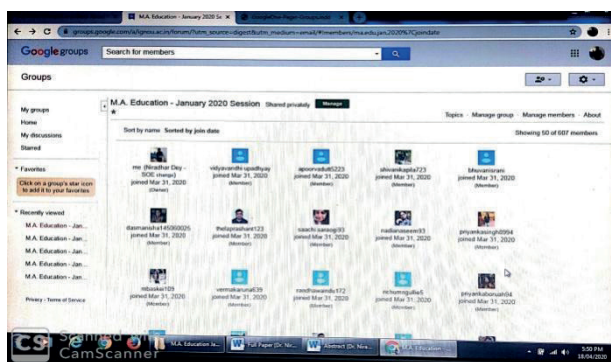
- Again the Union Government declared a complete 21 Days Lockdown across the country starting from 25th March 2020 to 14th April 2020.
- Many States have also declared lockdown to be continued till 30th April 2020.
- Many State Governments have also taken the decision to seal the hotspot areas apart from the lockdown.
- The Union Government finally extended the complete lockdown from 15th April 2020 to 3rd May 2020.

Source: Govt. of India Advisory on Covid-19

The above measures bring forward an opportunity for the teachers and academicians to deal with their

students and to continue the process of teaching-learning by using many online learning tools and applications. In this regard, on 31st March 2020, MHRD, Govt. of India, issued a letter to all the Central Universities seeking prompt action to continue the study program of the students enrolled with the Central Universities without any impediment from their home by adopting the online method of teaching-learning process (MHRD, 31st March, 2020). In line with the MHRD letter, IGNOU being a Central University undertook many actions to reach their learners by using various online teaching-learning methods keeping in view the nature of the academic programmes and the learning needs of the learners. In view of this, as a part of programme-wise online initiatives, a Google Groups of 1452 IGNOU learners of the M.A. Education programme had been created to address the learning needs of the learners during the Covid-19 Pandemic period.

**Figure-2: Google Group of IGNOU's M.A. (Education) Programme
ma.edu.jan.2020@ignou.ac.in**



A Case of M.A. Education Programme by using Online Google Groups

Computer based technology is one of the important aspects of the teaching-learning process. In a study on 'use of Wikis, Blogs, Twitter, Facebook, etc.', Laura et.al. (2017), reported that

computer-based technology influences student engagement, however, additional research is needed to confirm and build on these findings. Integrating technology into teaching and learning is not a new challenge for universities. For decades, administrators and faculty have grappled with how to effectively

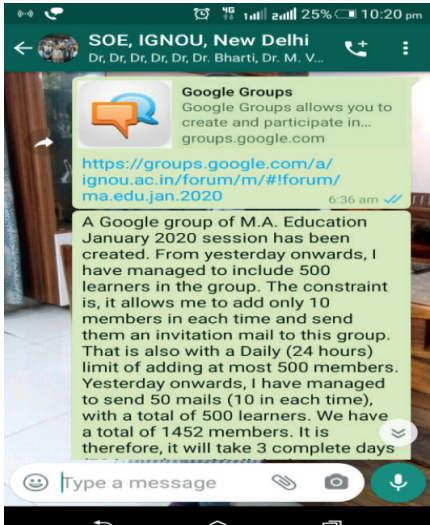
use technical innovations such as video and audio recordings, email, and teleconferencing to augment or replace traditional instructional delivery methods (Kaware & Sain, 2015; Westera, 2015). The study conducted by Armstrong and Thornton reported that students who participated in web-conferencing demonstrated critical reflection and enhanced learning through interactions with others (Armstrong & Thornton, 2012). Analyses of blog posts show evidence of students elaborating on one another's ideas and sharing experiences and conceptions of course content (Sharma & Tietjen, 2016). The practice of Wiki is useful for reflection, reinforcing course content, and applying academic skills (Miller et al., 2012). Social networking is "the practice of expanding knowledge by making connections with individuals of similar interests" (Gunawardena et al., 2009, p. 4). Learning Management System is associated with formal academic interactions while Facebook is associated with informal and social interactions (Camus et al., 2016).

The above studies deal with some of the technology-based tools used in the process of teaching and learning

and their effective use in curriculum transactions. Accordingly, engaging students in active learning processes and engaging them in peer and group discussions on various academic themes can also be done by using the online Google Groups. In this study, an experiment on Google Groups of M.A. (Education) learners had been done during the Pandemic time and results were reported.

As mentioned above, on 30th March 2020, an online Google Groups for the M.A. Education first year learners enrolled in the January 2020 session had been created by the programme coordinators of the M.A. Education programme (Google Group Id- ma.edu.jan.2020@ignou.ac.in). As the total number of the learners is 1452, it took 72 hours to invite/direct add members as there is the limitation of including at most 500 members in 24 hours, which is also adding only 10 members in one go. By 1st of April 2020, all the 1,452 learners were invited to the group. The online instructional process was started on 1st April 2020 and the article has been prepared on the basis of a complete two week of experiment in using the Google Groups i.e. by 15th April, 2020.

Figure-3: Creation of Google Groups link for the M.A. (Education) learners



As mentioned above, an invitation was sent to all the learners who had registered with an email id during their enrolment. The programme coordinator had received 1360 email ids out of the total 1452 M.A. Education

learners enrolled in the January 2020 session (SRD, IGNOU, March 2020). The following figure shows the data about the activation of Google groups for M.A. Education learners first Year January 2020 session.

Figure-4: Date relating to activation of Google Group

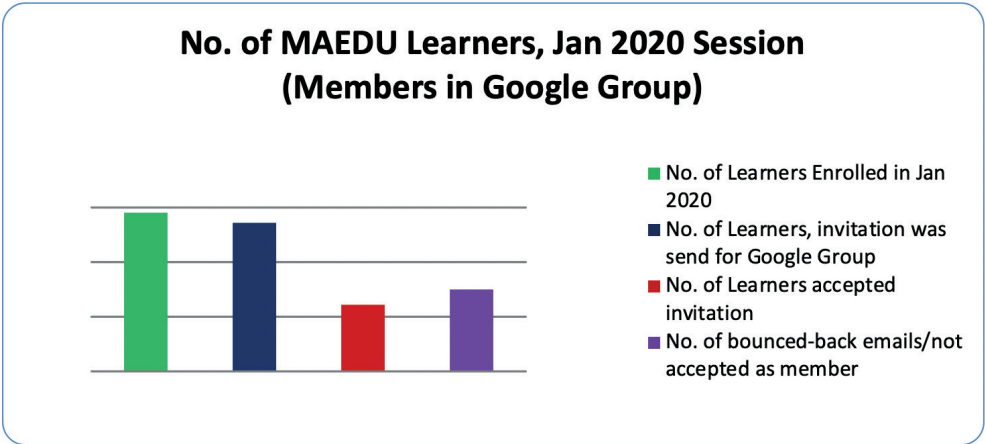


Figure-4 shows that 1,452 M.A. Education first year learners enrolled in the January 2020 session and among them, 1,360 learners had given their email id during their enrolment. All the 1,360 learners were invited to be members of the Google group. Among them, 610 learners immediately accepted the membership and were actively participating in the group whereas 750 emails were either bounced back or not accepted by the learners as members in the group. But, this has been observed that everyday new members were accepting their invitation and membership numbers were increasing.

From the day of the original functioning of this group, i.e. from 1st April 2020 to 15th April 2020, a total of 50 posts have been made in the group by the programme coordinator. The group has been created keeping the following objectives in mind:

1. To provide an induction towards the

programme to the newly enrolled M.A. Education learners in January 2020 session.

2. To support them to get all necessary information and direct links to get general queries/information, Self-Learning Materials, Assignment and Term End Examination Questions, various audio-video programmes relating to the programme, presentation slides on various issues, other OER-based learning materials, etc.
3. To provide learning support by direct, peer and group interaction through discussion forums on various components and content of the programme.

Based upon the above three objectives, very strategically the group was managed. The nature and categories of various postings for a discussion forum in the group were as follows:

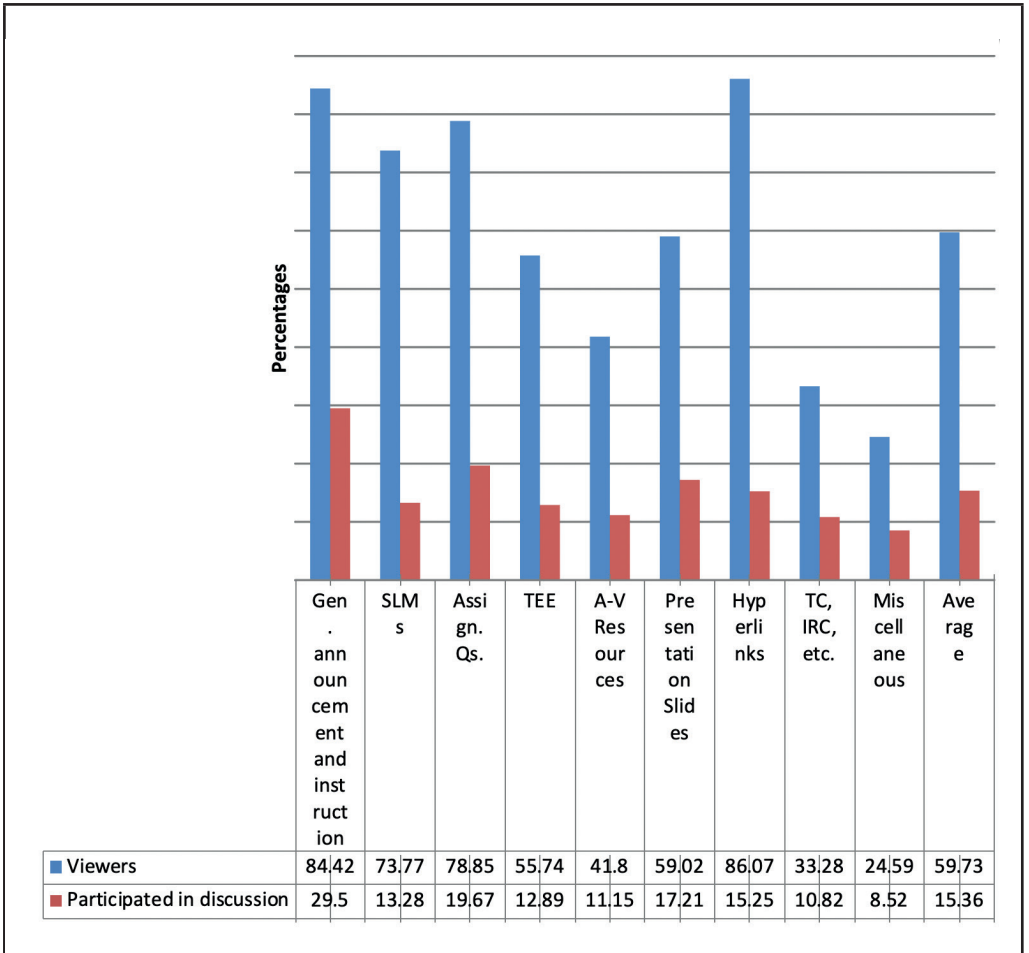
Table-2: Categories of posting in the Google groups from 1st April to 15th April 2020 (Total active members, N- 610) Italicized figures are in %ages

S.N.	Categories	Total No. of Posting by the Programme Coordinator	Total Views (N-610)	Posts made by the Group Members and participate in discussion (N-610)
1	General Announcements and Instructions	5	515 <i>84.42</i>	180 <i>29.5</i>
2	Self-Learning Materials	4	450 <i>73.77</i>	81 <i>13.28</i>
3	Assignment Questions	5	481 <i>78.85</i>	120 <i>19.67</i>
4	Term End Examination	3	340 <i>55.74</i>	78 <i>12.89</i>
5	Audio-Video Resources	8	255 <i>41.80</i>	68 <i>11.15</i>
6	Presentation Slides	6	360 <i>59.02</i>	105 <i>17.21</i>
7	Sharing Hyperlinks of OERs and other important Resources	30	525 <i>86.07</i>	93 <i>15.25</i>
8	Teleconferencing, IRC, Gyandhara, SWAYAM and SWAYAMPrabha, etc.	5	203 <i>33.28</i>	66 <i>10.82</i>
9	Miscellaneous	7	150 <i>24.59</i>	52 <i>8.52</i>
	Total	72	3279 <i>59.73</i>	843 <i>15.36</i>

Table 2 revealed different categories of postings made by the programme coordinator over the said days, and subsequently viewed the postings made by the learners as well as relating postings made by the learners on the themes and participated in direct, peer and group discussion forums in the

group. It was reported that the average viewer percentages were more than the average posts made/participated in the discussion. Figure 5 presented briefly the percentage of viewers and posting made/participated in the discussion under each category of posting.

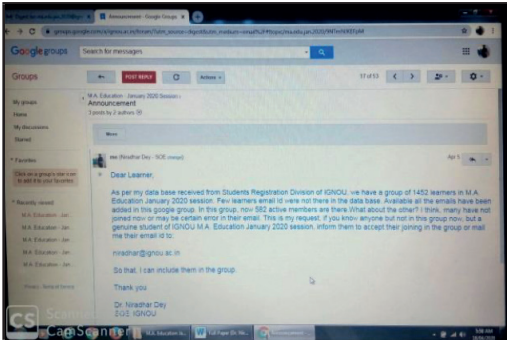
Figure-5: Percentage of viewers and posting made/participated in discussion forum in different categories of posting in the group



The above Figure-5 categorically depicts the percentage of viewers in each category of posting is much better than the percentage of participants in discussion forums in each category of posting as well as in overall viewers and participants in the discussion. It provides a clue for discussion of the findings that learners were active enough to view the posting made in the Google groups but among them very few were

turning out for a fruitful discussion on various issues. It was observed that on an average 60 per cent (approximately) of learners were viewing different postings in the group whereas 15 per cent (approximately) were really participating in various discussions in the group. Let us now discuss some of the discussions and postings made in different categories.

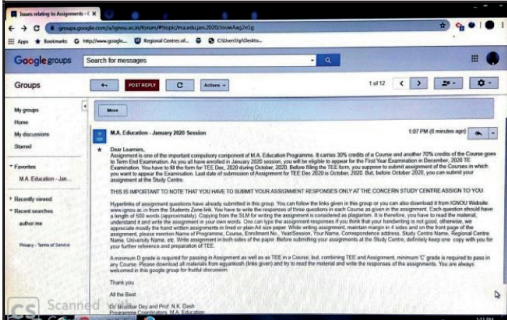
Figure-6: Google Groups posting on various categories (few examples)



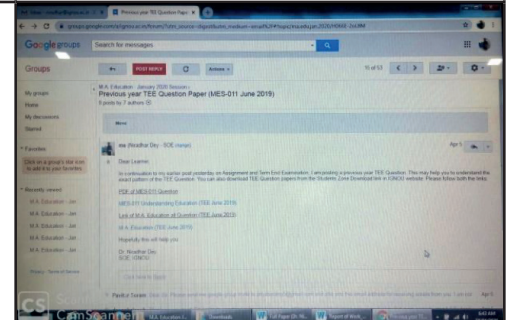
Posting on General Announcement and Instruction



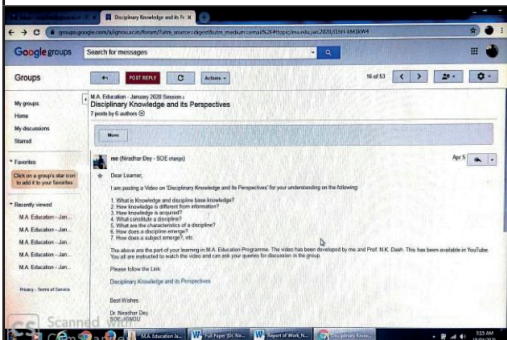
Posting on Self-Learning Materials



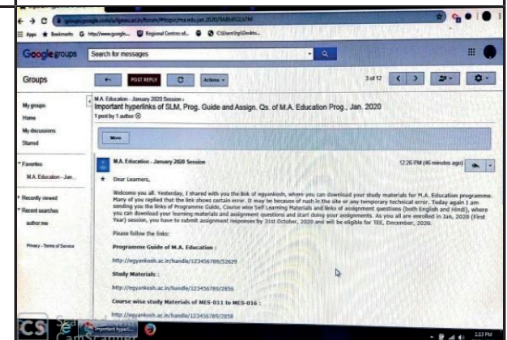
Posting on Assignment Questions



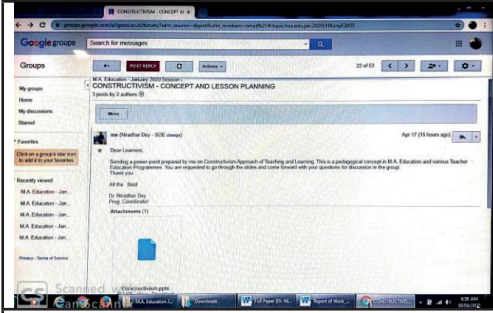
Posting on TEE



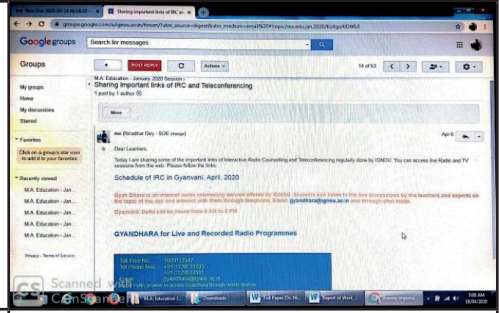
Posting on Audio-Video Materials



Posting on various Hyperlinks



Posting of Presentation Slides



Posting on TC and IRC

Figure-6 revealed various postings in the Google groups for discussion. As this has explained earlier that the percentage of viewers was much better than the learners who participated in various discussions but it was evident that discussions made in the discussion

forum were quite interesting and it was a way forward for quality learning through this Google group. Let us take an example, of how the learners participated in a discussion forum in the Google group and solve their learning difficulties.

Name of the Learner: Nandana Varma
Programme: M.A. Education (January, 2020)
Place: Under RC Bangalore
Theme of queries asked in Google Group discussion forum: Teaching through Assignment
Date: 6th April, 2020

Details of the query asked by the member :

Respected Sir,
Kindly clarifies a small doubt on one of the assignment questions of MES-011.

(C) Explain the concepts of Equality and Equity in education. Discuss the influence of the economic "system" on equality of educational opportunity.

However in the study material it is mentioned about the influence of economic "constraints" on equality of educational opportunity in Unit 10 section 10.5.1.

Please explain if both the terms economic system and economic constraints are the same? Can we use both terms in place of each other in our assignment responses?

Response given by the Google Group owner :

To response your query, I may say the following:

1. Equality in education means to provide equal educational opportunity to all just like Universalisation of Elementary Education. We provide equal educational opportunity to all irrespective of caste, class, religion, region, gender, etc. It is the constitutional provision to provide equal educational opportunity to all.

2. Equity goes one step ahead of equality. It says, equal educational opportunity to all as well as to reach at a minimum educational standard (quality) by all. It emphasizes not only Universalisation of Elementary Education but also Universalisation of Quality Elementary Education to all. Reaching at the minimum level of learning (MLL) is an example of equity in education. Right to Education Act, 2009, gives its recommendations both on equality as well as equity in Elementary Education.

3. Economic system of a country directly or indirectly influences equality and equity in education. Equal distribution of wealth and making economic empowerment to the citizen increases equality and equity not only in education but also all other sectors.

4. The economic system and economic constraints are not the same. Economic system has a broader connotation that explains the entire economic process of a country whereas economic constraint reflects the hurdles and difficulties that the section of people faces because of the system of economic distribution process. Economic system may be a cause whereas economic constraint may be an effect. It has also a direct link towards achieving equality and equity in education.

Further, you are requested to read the materials and present your assignment properly.

Thank you

Owner, Google Group

The above interaction in the discussion forum of the Google group clearly implies that the learners were not only getting information about the programme but also they were actively engaged in their study and were satisfying their learning needs. Likewise, many such active discussions have taken place during the last two weeks which has made the learners engaged in their studies during the Covid-19 Pandemic days.

Apart from these, online discussions have been initiated by the owner of the group on different themes by providing them with various quality resources which are available on YouTube, OER sites, IGNOU achieves, and also specially created by the owner of the group.

It was just an example. Accordingly, many such postings had been made during the days and rigorous discussions had taken place on every issue.

Results and Implications of the Study

Results

The following findings are reported in the study:

- Learners have successfully accessed the hyperlinks base documents like SLMs, Assignment Questions, PowerPoint presentations, Audio-Video Materials, Term End Examination question papers, Teleconferencing & Interactive Radio Counselling sessions, and have also acquainted themselves with many other operational issues of the programme by using the online Google Groups.
- The percentage of viewers on every theme in the posting of the group was really appreciated but the percentage of learners who participated in the group in the discussion forum was not so satisfactory (Table 2 and Figure 5).

- In practice of only two week of learning through the online Google Groups, it has been realised that the learners have successfully inducted with the programme and had engaged in studies like writing their assignment responses, effectively participated in discussion forums on various themes of the programme and have also engaged in peer and group learning processes.

- An add-on with the regular transaction of the programme through using the Google group creates many doors open for the learners as well as for the programme coordinators to think of in changing the transaction strategies of the programme in future.

- Covid-19 Pandemic was an opportunity for the programme coordinators as well as for the learners to engage themselves in the online process of teaching and learning and to explore many opportunities for real-time quality learning.

- It was no doubt a successful experiment by the programme coordinators of the M.A. Education programme to provide various online learning experiences to the learners and to engage them in studies by using Google groups during the Covid-19 Pandemic period.

- The merit of using blended mode for the transaction of M.A. the (Education) programme had been realised and learners had better understood the concept presented in the Self Learning Materials.

Implications

The implications of the study are very widespread. The experiences gained through experimentation with the online

Google groups in addition to regular strategies of programme transaction were quite impressive and it was an eye-opener for the programme coordinators to make it a systemic requirement for implementing the programme for the future. In the ODL system, IGNOU implements a three-tier system of programme implementation, i.e. at the IGNOU main campus, Regional Centres and Study Centres levels. Programme coordinators were getting very little chance to directly interact with the learners and satisfy their learning needs. In view of this, Google group provided an opportunity to directly interact with the learners and accordingly solve their learning difficulties. Therefore, a platform of online learning as additional

support for the learners should be established in every programme for better managing the programme and also to satisfy the learning needs of the learners. Though this Google group has been created especially to operate during the Covid-19 Pandemic period still its implications have been felt that the group should work throughout the studentship period of the learners and contribute dedicatedly for solving various issues of the learners.

Apart from the Google group's experience, it has also been realised that various social media networks such as Facebook; YouTube etc. can also be used for engaging learners in authentic learning.

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Abbreviations

A/V Resources – Audio Visual Resources

IRC – Interactive Radio Counselling

MLL – Minimum Level of Learning

ODL – Open and Distance Learning

OER – Open Educational Resources

RC – Regional Centre

RSD – Regional Service Division

SC – Study Centre

SLMs – Self Learning Materials

TC – Teleconferencing

TEE – Term End Examination

WHO – World Health Organisation

(Note: The article is the revised version of a paper presented in the International Online Conference on Teaching-Learning in the Time of Pandemic: Role of Online Learning organised by the Krishna Kanta Handique State Open University, Guwahati, Assam, India in collaboration with Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA), New Delhi during 21-22 April 2020.)