ENHANCING ADULT LITERACY THROUGH CREATION OF LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract

In a nation like India, literacy is the fundamental establishment for social and monetary development. According to the 2011 evaluation, literacy rate in India is found to be 74.04% of entire population when contrasted with 65% in 2001.The overall literacy rate in the nation may have gone up, however the drop-in illiteracy rate is not coordinated with the increase in population. It is in this regard that many organizations are working extensively to improve the literacy rate of the Indian population. One such initiative is the SHIKSHA+ of the Shiv Nadar Foundation that additionally utilizes an information technology-based strategy to impart the basics of reading, writing and math aptitude among uneducated adults who have not gone to a conventional school. SHIKSHA+ makes sure that second chance education is provided to the illiterates. This paper reviews the activities of the SHIKSHA+ programme and then proposes a model for designing a lifelong learning environment in rural communities. The proposed model can be driven by the members of the community so that a sense of ownership prevails.

Keywords: Adult Literacy, Adult Education, Lifelong Learning, Learning Community, Learning Environment.

Introduction

Education is one of the most remarkable instruments for improving the quality of life, empowering people to become dynamic members in the change of their social orders. It enables them to fathom their social, political and social climate better and react to it suitably. In a nation like India, literacy is the fundamental establishment for social and monetary development. According to the 2011 evaluation, literacy rate in India is found to be 74.04% of entire population when contrasted with 65% in 2001.The overall literacy rate in the nation may have gone up, however the drop-in illiteracy rate is not coordinated with the increase in population. A 2015 UNESCO report said, that as far as outright numbers are concerned, India - with 28.7 crore illiterate people - was the nation with the biggest number of grown-ups without fundamental literacy skills in 2010-11 contrasted with 2000-01 when it had 30.4 crore unskilled people.

Despite the fact that literacy rate has risen in the previous 10 years, it is yet a matter of worry that still countless individuals in India can't read and write. As per recent data, about 775 million adults lack the minimum education that is required to be literate and of those, 60.7 million children are out of school or rarely attended school.

According to the UNESCO's 'Global Monitoring Report on Education for All' (2006), South Asia has the lowest regional adult literacy rate at 58.6%. Illiteracy can be an impediment, stalling the growth of an individual and the society at large. 'Learning' can re-establish our human potential, dignity, compassion. For such an action-oriented approach the concept of learning must be seen beyond what happens in spaces meant for learning formally. Rather, flawless processes emerge from one-to-one interaction in informal spaces. Lifelong learning serves individuals to constantly adjust and extend information and the capacity to apply the knowledge, skills & competencies gained.

In 2016, An Initiative was deliberately started for adult learners through SHIKSHA+. This was an attempt to help the adult learners acquire literacy non-formally in their communities, who were earlier deprived of attending school or gaining formal education. In 2017, SHIKSHA Initiative expanded its operation to five blocks of Sitapur district in Uttar Pradesh, India: Biswan, Khairabad, Gondlamau, Sidhauli and Machhrehta. SHIKSHA+ additionally utilizes an ICT-based strategy to impart the basics of reading, writing and math aptitudes among uneducated adults who have not gone to a conventional school. Adults in Shiksha+ program vary in culture, age, financial status, language, sex/gender, motivational needs, capacity and individual interests.

With the ongoing initiatives of SHIKSHA+ a sustainable model in the community with focus on non-formal and informal learning is highly valuable, irrespective of the barriers of illiteracy or formal education.

There could be opportunities created for enhanced engagement, in the sense of intergenerational learning processes. This will create a natural learning environment which helps adults acquire literacy in the most relevant and non-artificial manner. Further, this in its true sense can lead to adults being motivated for lifelong and life-wide learning.

Conceptualization of Lifelong Learning

In the 1970s, the term lifelong learning had been used interchangeably with 'recurrent education', 'continuing education' or 'adult education'. The reasons for the same stem from the ideology, that the use of a particular term helped policy makers to distinguish resource needs of the younger and older learners. This in the time of economic constraint and limited budgets was the way forward mostly adopted by the political institutions.

However, during the 1990s at international policy level, 'lifelong learning' became an overarching term which contained aspects such as 'recurrent education', 'lifelong education' or simply 'adult education'. The eruption of lifelong learning has been a response to the ever-changing socio, political, economic and technological environment (OECD, 1992).

In this regard, the need for developing stronger training systems which support life-wide and life-deep learning was realized. Recognition of the fact that a country's individual and government led policies depend on the nature of its training system inherited is crucial. A shift was observed between late 1970s and early 1990s wherein the elements of adult education were moulded to encompass the broader skeleton of lifelong learning. With the advent of more work-based programmes, it was seen that this resulted in attracting adult groups who were traditionally deprived of opportunities or were unable to reap the benefits of formal education setup. In the light of policy making, there is increased awareness that development of human capital is essential for self-construction, social cohesion and economic growth.

Lifelong learning incorporates learning at all ages and subsumes formal, non-formal and informal learning. There are many ways of conceptualizing lifelong learning. 'Learning to be' helps one evolve and continuously learn (Fauré et al, 1972: vi). Therefore, much more needs to be done to implement lifelong learning opportunities. Investment in human resources has to be increased drastically. Lifelong learning is seen as imbibed aspect of our lives as well as focused on self-growth. This means that there is an explicit reference to schooling or education no longer being 'the privilege of an elite' (Fauré et al, 1972, p.160). Lifelong learning is regarded as an investment for, through life and of life.

Understanding the SHIKSHA+ Adult Literacy Model

SHIKSHA+ operates on two models. One is the instructor model; and the other being the Volunteer model. In the 'Instructor' model, instructors (SHIKSHA on - roll employees) implement the program. They are hired on long term basis and can be asked to move from one village to another. Moreover, along with teaching they are engaged in providing on field support to the Jan Shikshak i.e., conducting surveys, data compilation, mobilization, documentation, experimentation etc.

In the 'Volunteer' model, Jan Shikshaks (JS) who are hired as volunteers from the community help in implementing the program on ground. Further, SHIKSHA+ initiative plans depending on the number of illiterates. Batch of 10-15 learners is created in the village with through community mobilization activities done by GPS and volunteers. Content of SHIKSHA+ is based on "Nai Kiran" developed and used by State Resource Centre, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India. The same content has been enhanced for a technology-based dissemination approach to instill learning retention among learners[1].

The content is designed to be completed in 90 Content Management System (CMS) active days and has 24 Chapters based on reading, writing and numeracy skills. "Nai Kiran" has two parts - Praveshika Part I (12 chapters) and Praveshika Part II (12 chapters). On an average it takes about 4.5 months to complete 90 CMS days. This book consists of course equivalent to standard III, which needs to be completed in either 300 hours or 90 CMS days. These tests are called PT (Post Tests) by SHIKSHA+ and after conducting one PT, they prefer to allot revision time of 2 days. After that, same test is conducted and is termed as PAT (Post Augmentation Test). Therefore, SHIKSHA+ conducts total 12 tests. Moreover, there is another book called 'Abhyas Pustika', which is an exercise booklet designed by the SHIKSHA+ team strictly based on the line and length of 'Nai Kiran'. Content provides opportunity to engage, exercise and generate self-learning opportunity.

The content is developed by education practitioners and includes interactive animations, cartoons, videos, audios and exercises aimed at helping adults learn better. It supports subject knowledge and ensures that use of technology enhances teaching and learning. It has been widely recognized that fostering digital literacy in the classroom helps to diversify this experience and knowledge to make learning purposeful. A single batch runs for about 90 CMS working days with duration of 1.5 hours/day. It can be extended if learners are not able to grasp the required learning goals of the content management system, or in case of any unforeseen condition/situation. During the household village survey and the mobilization activities, the volunteers from respective villages identify potential learners. All the identified potential learners are called for demo classes of 4 days and a baseline test is conducted. This process enables selection of 10-15 learners to form a batch. Once the learners are mobilized, the demo class of four days gets

organized. The objective is to ensure that all the learners who have enrolled are motivated to continue in the class for next 90 CMS days.

After the 90 CMS days are over, assessment is undertaken to assess the proficiency level of the attained functional literacy skills on 3Rs of Reading, Writing and Arithmetic. It also provides the feedback on how well the learners are able to understand and internalize the content delivered to them. There is also an assessment that is conducted after completion of every four chapters. Based on the performance, augmentation classes are also held.

[1]https://shikshainitiative.org/en_US/shiksha-model/

After the successful completion of the program, an Endline assessment is conducted and its results are compared with the baseline results to assess the knowledge acquired since the beginning and overall impact of the program.

Finally, a certificate is provided to each learner after the due completion of the course. As a lifelong learning process for the adult learners, a library and reading-room facility is arranged in one of the communities, so that learners are engaged and can practice even after passing out from the program. This is to enable a culture of lifelong learning in the community.

Model for Creating a Learning Environment in the Community for Adult Learners
A learning community goes beyond providing literacy or education for those who need it but rather facilitates a participatory and economically viable setup by actively providing opportunities to enhance learning potentialities of people. For this to happen at the community level/Meso level, the concept of learning must be seen beyond what happens in isolated spaces. Rather, dynamic processes emerge from interactions in informal spaces, such as the family, neighbourhood, among peers, work environments, professional associations, recreational gatherings and other socio-cultural events.

A nine-stage framework is proposed to understand the needs of the learners and work with them in close connection to develop a lifelong learning strategy. It is necessary that the learners feel the immediate use and context of the learning activities planned. Hence, the framework adopted from McCaffery et al. 1999b is useful in this regard. This model aims to provide a learning environment to the target group (the community dwellers; especially neo-literates) which includes the activity and outcomes of learning, rather than being just a location where learning takes place. The methodological approach for the same is based on the five action phases of design thinking: 1). Identify & empathize; 2). Define; 3). Ideate; 4). Prototype; and 5). Test.

Literacy is something that is used and learned in the community, rather than just being an activity of the literacy class, and that communication and access to information can be enhanced through oral, visual and literacy-based practices (Maddox 2004). A nine-stage framework is referred to for understanding the needs of the learners and working with them in close connection to develop a lifelong learning strategy. It is necessary that the learners feel the immediate use and context of the learning activities planned.

The basic ideology for a conceivable model, to ensure continuity in learning would revolve around adoption of dependable solutions and proving communities of rural India, to become an epitome of endless learning and sustainability – more specifically a learning community. Learning communities need to become a unique feature of today's societies. These learning communities have the power to specifically build the social capital of the region/community.

STAGE 1: IDENTIFY AND EMPATHIZE - Audience: Literate/Neo- Literate/Illiterate Adults. In order to bring about a transformational change in the mindset of community dwellers with regard to need for non-formal/in formal learning systems, it is essential to promote a culture of lifelong learning; to help connect the use of literacy to their environment.

STAGE 2: DEFINE - Hence, focus problems identified: such as high rate of illiteracy, lack of motivation with respect to the need for literacy and learning without purpose for immediate use.

STAGE 3: IDEATE - Local writing done on walls can serve as tool for literacy as well as beautification/restoration of the community spaces; creation of directional boards; relevant signage; banners etc; labeling spaces around school or clinic, police station or local government offices, hospitals, places of worship etc.; creation of slogans, local proverbs, traditional songs and sayings which are passed on from one generation to another.; name plates outside homes; and so on.

STAGE 4: PROTOTYPE - Stages involved can be:

- Community led planning team which initiates discussions to assess the needs and highlight the spaces where the above texts/writing/slogans etc. can be placed; community-based funding/SHIKSHA+ funding;
- Short listing the final spaces/sign boards to be placed;
- Listing names of persons who would be writing; (all labels to have the name of writer as a motivational input);
- Executing the creation of texts/slogans based on the needs identified by the community.

STAGE 5: TEST - A pilot study needs to be done and feedback should be obtained from the community members. Review post feedback should be initiated and the required amendments to improve learning opportunities must be made.

With the ongoing initiatives of SHIKSHA+ a sustainable model in the community with focus on non-formal and informal learning is highly valuable, irrespective of the barriers of illiteracy or formal education. There could be opportunities created for enhanced engagement, which provide ownership and a sense of belongingness to the learners of the community. This will create a natural learning environment which helps adults acquire literacy in the most relevant and non-artificial manner.

Conclusion

Lifelong learning strives to address the above-mentioned problems of uncertainties and insecurities arising from global inequalities by adopting learning orientations towards UNESCO's four pillars of a 'learning society'. 'Literacy as critical reflection' has a long history and Freire, one of its key advocates, is perceived by most proficiency professionals. In any case, the best possible utilization of a critical reflection approach has infrequently been mainstreamed. Its quality lies in empowering members to investigate and ponder over their own society and their place inside it, and in doing as such to address the inequalities (Freire, 1972)

Literacy as critical reflection' can possibly change people and networks. Like the social-literacy approach, critical reflection relies upon exceptionally experienced instructors (McCaffery, J., Merrifield, J., & Millican, J. 2007). It means encouraging learners to look beyond 'reading the word' to 'reading the world', in the words of Paulo Freire. It involves working with learners to examine the writings they read to comprehend what lies behind them, regarding substance, setting, and the way they are composed.

Giving due consideration to skills, knowledge, and practices, a critical reflection way to deal with literacy can motivate adult learners to become leaders/initiators in building up their own social order. To know is not to learn and thereby to continue learning is the leading way of major developmental programmes. Through this model, there could opportunities created for increased engagement that led to seamless lifelong learning processes in the communities.

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