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Dewey, Desi, and DEC: Exploring the educational philosophy of Indian open, online, and distance education

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores pedagogical underpinnings of current Indian open, online, and distance education. Tracing the history of national and cultural adherence to the precepts of American educational theorist and philosopher, John Dewey, the paper notes the Deweyesk perspective has not translated into constructivist distance educational practices. The work surveys the history of distance education in India, and reviews literature in the field produced by Indian academics, whose recent reports suggest that online education may be transforming Indian educational philosophy, bringing a more constructivist approach to teaching on the sub-continent.

- The paper is organized into the following sections:
- A brief history of open, distance, and online education in India
- The role that John Dewey’s ideas play on the subcontinent
- Philosophical underpinnings of Indian online education
- The current state of Indian online education

KEYWORDS: John Dewey, Web 2.0, Open Education Resources, elearning, online learning, e-education, constructivism, Pragmatism

INTRODUCTION

This paper will explore the pedagogical underpinnings of current Indian online education. The paper takes its name from the American educational guru and philosopher, John Dewey, the Hindi word “desi” which loosely means “local”, and DEC, the Indian Distance Education Council. Recent reports suggest that online education is transforming Indian educational philosophy, bringing a more constructivist approach to teaching on the sub-continent.

- The paper will be organized into the following sections:
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A BRIEF HISTORY OF OPEN, DISTANCE, AND ONLINE EDUCATION IN INDIA

IGNOU

IGNOU, or the Indira Gandhi National Open University, was first created by an act of Parliament in 1985. With over three and a half million students, it is the world's largest university and serves both urban and rural students with the mission of offering citizens everywhere access to a quality education. IGNOU is an open institution, allowing students of any age the opportunity to pursue a university program. For many students, IGNOU delivers education at a distance using a variety of delivery models including distribution of printed materials, video and television, and more recently, online education.

DEC

Also created in 1985 under the IGNOU act, the Distance Education Council (DEC) was formed to coordinate and promote the IGNOU. DEC's responsibilities include setting and maintaining academic standards in distance education and making "full use of the latest scientific knowledge and new educational technology" to support education at a distance. DEC is responsible for authorizing any distance education endeavor in India.

IITs AND THE ELITES

The 1951 Institutes of Technology Act created what are known as the IITs, or Indian Institutes of Technology, the premier and most highly competitive educational institutions in India. Although traditional and risk averse in many arenas, the IITs have at various times taken leadership roles in the undertaking of various technological projects that expand the scope of distance education, particularly in online and mobile learning. Of note is IIT Bombay with its video course offerings, provided for free over the Internet.

THE ROLE JOHN DEWEY'S IDEAS PLAY ON THE SUBCONTINENT

Within limits, we may say that Dewey is the key figure in educational philosophy in the U.S. Born in Vermont, educated at several universities including the University of Vermont and Johns Hopkins University, teaching at the University of Chicago, where he was one of the founders of the University's Laboratory School, and at Columbia, where the Bank Street school began, Dewey's progressive educational ideas stood in sharp contrast to earlier educational approaches, whether those anchored by the teaching of Greek and Latin, or those focused primarily on rote memory. Arguing that those conservative approaches were not worthy of the name of education, Dewey proposed that education should not be regarded as preparation for a student to engage with the world but that education should be part of the world. Curriculum should support this idea, too. Hence, a curriculum should steep a student in daily, practical activities such as cooking, citizenship, and democracy, because these are the very activities in which every adult

must participate. Indeed, most of the constructivist ideas that have marked U.S. education for the past forty years trace their intellectual lineage to Dewey. “My Pedagogic Creed,” Dewey’s educational philosophy essay, clearly defines the nascent constructivist movement a full seventy years before others took up its ideas. “The individual who is to be educated is a social individual and ... society is an organic union of individuals,” (p. 6) wrote Dewey, expressing the core idea which crafts the relationship between learning inter-psychologically and learning intra-psychologically.¹ Dewey becomes even more explicit when writing “that the psychological and social sides are organically related” (p. 5). Here the term, “organically,” refers to that which is natural or innate.

Notice that in both of the above statements, Dewey uses the word organic, not in the manner that a breakfast cereal might, but rather to bring home the notion that learning grows out of its situation within the world rather than functioning as consequence of a clearly defined pathway. An educational structure is a scaffold, not a mold. In our era, Dewey’s ideas are often associated with social learning media. Glassman and Kang (2011) suggest “[t]he promise of the Web 2.0 is similar to ideas proposed by Ambrose Pierce and John Dewey” (abstract), explaining that “[a]t the core of Web 2.0 tools is control of data by users, architectures of participation, remixable data and the ability to transform data, and the harnessing of collective intelligence” (94). Brown and Adler (2008), argue that “the most visible impact of the Internet on education to date has been the Open Educational Resources (OER) movement (p. 18), which they associate with “the practice of what John Dewey called ‘productive inquiry’” (p. 20).

In the most telling line from his creed, Dewey states that “the process and goal of education are one and the same thing” (p. 13); indeed, this is perhaps the most defining line of the entire constructivist movement. For Dewey and his followers, knowledge is not something that can be transmitted; it is not a thing; rather it is the process itself by which we make meaning of the world.

Although the US educational system makes much of Dewey’s views, he also was firmly entrenched within the philosophical movement known as American Pragmatism, exemplified by the writings of Pierce and James. Followers of American Pragmatism asserted that knowledge comes from the adaptation of man to his environment. The word spread in form of a philosophy more so than an educational movement. In India, it is not unusual to find Dewey regarded as the exemplar of non-Platonic philosophy rather than as an educational guru. Dewey’s role in Indian intellectual life is best exemplified by the writings of B.R. Ambedkar (Mukherjee, 2009). It is Dewey’s progressive thinking that set in motion Ambedkar’s attack on the Indian caste system and the establishment of the rights of the untouchables. Significantly, India’s first president, Jawaharlal Nehru, sent greetings to Dewey on the occasion of Dewey’s ninetieth birthday.² Moreover, Dewey was no stranger to India intellectual endeavor; he wrote the introduction to Chatterji’s *India’s Outlook On Life: The Wisdom Of The Vedas* (Chatterji, 2007).

PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF INDIAN ONLINE

¹ This distinction speaks to the role that social learning has in individual learning

² Information regarding the birthday greetings Jawaharlal Nehru sent John Dewey from the Dinner Program retrieved from the Dewey Center at Southern Illinois University.

EDUCATION

Indian online education is part of the worldwide mainstream of educational thinking, different, perhaps, from that in the US, but not so much so because its primary language is still about access, scalability, and the hope that technologically-mediated education will improve the lives of its people.

Dewey was the quintessential progressive educator, and many educationalists worldwide embrace his ideas, specifically those that speak to a “constructivist” approach to learning, an approach that assumes meaning is made at the intersection of idea and experience. Constructivism stands in sharp contrast to the behaviorist model of learning, which focuses on changes in observable behavior and is shaped by a subject’s response to stimuli. Often, though, the endorsement of Dewey’s ideas comes only in words, not in the acts of designing and discussing teaching and learning. Indian educationalists are no exception. A survey of Indian online educational researchers and theorists reveals that pattern.

THE CURRENT STATE OF INDIAN ONLINE EDUCATION

Given the Indian proclivity to embrace Dewey, the philosopher, we might ask if Dewey’s educational ideas have permeated the area of online education in India. The remainder of this paper will explore the nature of online pedagogy within the context of that question.

India has embraced both open education and distance education, and has embraced the use of technology. As a socialist democracy, India is committed to providing access to its educational system. As mentioned in the opening paragraphs, India’s Indira Gandhi Open University is the largest such institution in the world. But it has been less than “cutting edge” in the employment of technology. IGNOU is still largely a correspondence center with various local hubs to provide additional face-to-face support. That being said, there is a wide body of literature that discusses how technology is now facilitating education throughout India.

Multimedia is supplanting text in some educational offerings. Sahni and Sharma (2012) discuss a study whereby teacher trainees involved in a distance learning course were given material in one of two forms, text or picture and sound. What’s revealing is not so much the outcome of the study³, but how the researchers *present* the study. They couch the language of the report in behavioral terms: “If information is presented via two or more of these channels, there will be additional reinforcement” (p. 35). Additionally, they take an almost anti-constructivist approach as if making meaning is not to be encouraged: “If words alone are presented to the learners, they try to form their own mental images and this may cause them to miss the actual points of learning” (p. 35).

³ Sahni and Sharma reported that the multimedia program provided better learning and was more effective with low achievers than high achievers.

Juxtapose this idea with a recent paper by Kumar, Tewari, Shroff, Chittamuru, Kam and Canny (2010): In a study of mobile learning, they focused specifically on unsupervised learning with mobile phones. They referred to the material being accessed as having “educational content” yet at different occasions, referred to them as “eLearning games” or simply as “games.” The study itself looked at rural children and explored two major issues: access to electricity to charge the phone and the social networks created to use the phone. The researchers treat the social relationships, and the importance of those relationships to the learning endeavor, as of importance at least equal to the way phone use enabled access to new content, an idea much more in tune with Dewey’s ideas of making schooling an integrated component of life rather than an activity distinct from life.

Where Kumar et al open exploration of networked relationships and embed those within a social constructivist approach, Lama and Kashyap (2012) tie their study of community radio in open distance learning even more specifically to Dewey’s work. Here the language itself echoes Dewey: “Education has to be set in a practical world” (p. 244). Lama and Kashyap describe a community radio project as being focused on the practical as well as the academic. For youth, programs on how to take a job interview coexist alongside courses in tourism and hospitality management. For women, programs run the gamut from women’s legal issues to beauty and health topics. And, it should also be pointed out that full degree programs are offered in computer networking, journalism, and library information science. The community radio programming these researchers describe exists at the bachelors’ and post-graduate level.

Sharma (2012) takes a different stance in exploring distance education and the barriers to learning. He explores the problems of “loss of student motivation due to the lack of face-to-face contact with teachers and peers” (p. 45) and lumps together the traditional correspondence, print media model with models that are electronically mediated, dismissing the difference based on the premise that the barriers exist regardless of the medium. Yet he does suggest that attention must be paid to create new models of learning, noting that “participatory and active learning models are preferred by distance learning students” (p. 45).

Thomas and Kothari (2011) discuss the opportunities and problems of the entire open source movement in India, particularly with regard to the digital repositories of the Indira Gandhi National Open University. The main repository is E-GyanKosh, where all copyright is reserved by IGNOU. While other open universities in India may use all of these materials, users cannot reuse, remix, copy or build upon the contents. Indeed, E-GyanKosh even has a wiki that is protected by copyright. Only the Indian Journal of Open Learning (IJOL) holds a creative commons license.

Shinde and Deshmukh (2012) place web-based education within a framework supported by Dewey’s pedagogical perspective by recognizing the importance of creating global citizens as one of the primary roles of education. “It is only through improving the educational condition of a society that the multi-faced progress of its people can be guaranteed” (p. 90). Shinde and Deshmukh cite the use of technology in the schools as

an indication that India is keeping pace with the educational systems of other nations in the world. They particularly discuss online education as a method to bring the educational advantages of an urban experience to rural students as well. The authors also discuss uniformity of curriculum as an outcome of web-based technologies, and specifically target interactivity, speed, and flexibility as key components on how Indian education is making use of eLearning. Their paper also explores the use of blended learning and the sharing of Internet links among students and teachers on “an almost daily basis” (p. 91). While the authors point out the technical advantages of bringing web-based education into the educational mainstream of India, they also note some of the social benefits cited by U.S. educators such as creating a more diverse student body, supporting life-long learning, and the democratization of education. Additionally, they believe that the current use of the Web in Indian education is shifting the very method of education: active, student-centered, dynamic, group work on real world problems, student directed, developing competencies, all straight out of Dewey’s work of a hundred years ago.

As democratic as open and distance education is, it has typically carried a stigma and by many is considered inferior to traditional face-to-face education. While this is changing in the U.S., globally such an attitude remains; however, Rao (2006) reports the shifting of attitudes in India where, because of digital technologies, distance education is gaining in status. Rao’s report was written a full 6 years before that of Shinde and Deshmukh’s and perhaps consequently we do not see the same Dewey-like understanding of education. Distance education, per Rao, “is a modality consisting of a broad, mixed, category of methods to deliver learning” (p. 228). For Rao, then learning is *delivered* rather than co-developed; information and knowledge are disseminated rather than constructed. The following statement by Rao enables us to better understand the structure of Indian distance education:

In India there are four types of institutions offering distance education, namely: IGNOU, State Open Universities, Directorates of DE functioning under conventional Universities (Dual Mode Universities) and private professional institutes. However, only the IGNOU uses third generation tools (Internet based education).... (p. 228)

Lama and Kashyap (2012) embrace a decidedly *Deweyesk* perspective which identifies distance learning as a tool to empower humanity. For some reason, though, they place the individual at a distance from the learning experience by their consistent use of the term “Human Resources” when referring to humans engaged learning. That said, they do note the fact that forms of distance education that employ digital resources provide flexibility in curriculum “which can be molded and shaped according to the need of the society” (p. 243).

Singh, Singh, and Singh (2012) tackle the differences between a traditional and an open educational system, particularly as seen through the eyes of rural versus urban students. Their study looked at satisfaction levels and draws the conclusion that rural students were much more satisfied with open education provided through a distance education model than with traditional, teacher-led education. In particular, students felt

that it was important to be offered a curriculum that understood their backgrounds and noted they felt estrangement as outsiders in the cities to which they otherwise would have to travel and live in order to engage in traditional education.

Ibrar (2012), a computer scientist, focused on the technology of India's online education and it is here that we begin to see the full range of possibilities: blogs, social bookmarking, wikis, RSS feeds, podcasts, instant messaging, text chats, and Internet forums are all used within the Indian online context. In his breakdown he employs the dimension of time, splitting VoIP, WebEx, videoconferencing, chat rooms from the asynchronous email, printed courseware, and even compact discs. Although Ibrar presents the potential for a *Deweyesk* teaching model, he describes the use of "existing materials and present theme as a static package via the Internet" (p. 8). He also focuses on the idea that content "is delivered" (p. 8). Ultimately, Ibrar proposes a very non-constructivist, *non-Deweyesk* approach, as represented in this sentiment: "[T]he entire course content is planned properly and includes various activities and assignments so as to make sure that the student learns in a comprehensive and proper manner" (p. 8).

Anitha (2012) prepared a study comparing eLearning and traditional learning in management education. She sought a rationale in the literature for choosing one over the other and cited two trainers in the business realm who addressed the limitations of online education with regard to the teaching of soft skills. She then prepared some charts that showed both pedagogical effectiveness and preferred learning mode, a figure which favored hybrid over traditional and traditional over online; however, she failed to demonstrate how she arrived at these measures.

Anand, Saxena and Saxena (2012) looked at the impact of eLearning on rural areas and find the practice is growing. Although they frame their discussion firmly in terms of "delivering" education, they move into the *Deweyesk* realm when talking about the development of "people's social and mental ability" (p. 51). Additionally, they distinguish eLearning's most important audience as the rural and/or poor gentry.

Bhateya and Rani (2012) define "e-education" as "the process of learning online" (p. 1), and discuss "the status of e-education and India." The authors cite market projections for the growth of the online learning industry in India (an increase from \$10B to \$45B over three years) to demonstrate the national commitment to a new educational paradigm. This article explores the Khan academy, Educomp, edX and Udacity's recent projects, and lists a host of benefits resulting from online learning including "real-life application of classroom materials" (p. 4). But the most clearly articulated alignment with a student-centered and *Deweyesk* approach rests with their endorsement of the idea that online learning can provide students with enriched learning experiences, support more successful learning strategies, and personalize students' educational experiences.⁴

Das (2010) argues that open and distance learning must move beyond the normal advantages (cost-efficient, more convenient, etc.) and focus on quality: quality of material, quality of the learner. Das suggest it is particularly important to ensure "learning outcomes comparable to the on-campus program" (p. 168). Indeed, he mentions that educational objectives need to be defined for each online course. Das explores student-faculty interaction, group activities, and access to academic services. He uses "learner-centric" (p. 169) language throughout a discussion of faculty

⁴ Here we may see future exploration of adaptive learning

development and explores the notions of access, quality, and continuous evaluation of the student.

Shah and Balam (2013) look to online education as a potential force for equalizing urban and rural educational offerings; Dewey himself was a strong supporter of rural and agricultural education. However, the language in their work suggests that they too see eLearning as something to be delivered whole rather than co-created. Yet, as dated as this approach might seem in light of the differentiation I've made between behavioral approaches to education and Dewey's constructivism, Shah and Balam describe email and chat as facilitating communication "among students and between students and the instructor" (p. 21) If, however, we are to draw conclusions about their constructivist credentials, their concluding lines show that they have a way to go; they suggest online "[c]ourses will be designed with the art of interactivity and the magic of good E-learning" (p. 21).

Finally, Kumar (2014) compares open-online education between India and China. He discusses how eLearning can improve "the quality of life of the people" (p. 126) by making education accessible in the "remotest corner of the county" and discusses the "heightened level of interaction with learners and learning resources that can ameliorate the conventional barriers of isolation..." faced by distance learners (p. 128).

In discussing online education, the cited researchers run the gamut from traditionalists to the Frierists, from those who think that information poured slowly into the learner's head will gel over time, perhaps even ferment, to those who understand education as a process of exploration, development, a process of becoming human. Ultimately even those who most seem to discuss knowledge as "a thing to be transmitted" appear to embrace Dewey's core commitment to educating students to become active participants in a vibrant, democratic society. This theme seems to run through every report originating from India, the world's largest democracy.

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