

# FROM POSTAL MODE TO OER: FIRST EXPERIENCES, CITATION ADVANTAGE AND LESSONS LEARNT IN DISTRIBUTING SELF LEARNING MATERIAL (SLM) ON ACEDEMIA.EDU

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## Abstract

**Background:** Multicultural diversities get integrated through unified education and objectives (Banks, 1997; Gollnick and Chinn, 1998). International Centre for Distance Education and Open Learning (ICDEOL), Himachal Pradesh University, India, already conscious of these diversities, unifies them with its intellectually and carefully crafted Self Learning Material (SLM) meant for distance learners. But as of now, the university has not posted these SLMs as Open Educational Resources (OERs) (such as open-source/online text books). These lessons are published by a press and then sent through the post to the learner's address. It is a point worth mentioning here that there is no mechanism or policy in India which directs these universities to work collectively for quality course generation and student-centric framework.

**Methods:** On Sept 2018, for the first time, the SLMs written for ELT students of ICDEOL, Himachal Pradesh University, India and its affiliated colleges were posted online as OER on academia.edu. The learners were followed as also their activity and reading habits on academia.edu. This process was checked through altmetrics provided by academia.edu. It was observed that most of the learners used Facebook to login SLM. On the other hand, many students used to server of HP University. **Conclusions:** This paper discusses the opportunities, challenges and lessons learnt after putting SLM of distant learners as OER on online platform for the first time. The present study also evaluates the impact of using SLMs as OER, learners' perception (Targeted and Non-Targeted Learners), global response as outcome of this action and the role of academia.edu. The citations to the lessons posted on academia.edu increased manifold as it also helped within a year this increased the impact factor of OER. Our students have described experiences which gave us unreported points of reference which will in future help us in understanding so many aspects of placing SLMs as OER.

**Keywords:** Open education resources, distance education, ICDEOL, SLM, OER, DE.

The mode of teaching and learning through distance mode has been known by different names in different countries like in Germany it is commonly known as *Frenstudium or Fernunterricht*; *Education-a-distantia* in Spain and *OJfcampus* in Australia. In New Zealand it is known as Extra mural as in US it is commonly known as Independent Study. In India, we use the terms such as Correspondence Education and Distance Education. After 112 years from the establishment of the first distance university of the world by the memorable efforts of James Harold Wilson (the former Prime Minister of UK), that is the University of London; in 1858, ICDEOL, Himachal Pradesh University was established in 1970 by an Act of the Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly.

ICDEOL with its administrative block in Shimla (Himachal Pradesh, India), the only sovereign institution of Himachal Pradesh offering higher education through correspondence, caters to the education needs of learners from various nations and states of India with multicultural background with diverse objectives. No doubt Shimla is an erstwhile summer capital of the British and is advanced in many ways (like facility of internet, library and so on) but frequent travelling cannot be done in many regions of Himachal Pradesh due to tough and hilly terrain. Distance education helps impart education to the disadvantaged groups in India (Kumar Sunil et al., 2008). Here also ICDEOL without deviating too far from what Kumar opined, breaks every barrier with its distance mode of education and distributed education, through SLMs and contact programmes in particular. It provides educational opportunities to many learners from far flung areas who have no access to internet and other facilities of communication.

## How these OER were made economical?

The major problem in developing nations like India is unfair and unequal access to learning (Dhanarajan & Abeywardena, 2013). Contrary to this Indian fact, ICDEOL provides undergraduate and postgraduate degrees at very nominal to everyone who is eligible to seek admission. The total fee (including the Registration fee, Application fee, Examination fee and other relevant fees) does not exceed Rs 2950/- per semester (for undergraduate degree of six semesters in which a semester has six months) which comes to 41.36 USD (ICDEOL). Within that fee the university provides course material in print form, salary to the teaching/official staff employed, documentation, personal contact programmes for students for seven to ten days and writing honorarium to teachers and writers. ICDEOL does not have its own printing press and the university has to hire some local printer for printing these lessons (after going through all codal formalities). That is why to save money the original SLM when gets the shape of a book is printed on A4 size paper with point 7 Times New Roman font so that more is covered in less.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Course Content (Indian aesthetics of translation) and its expansion to suit the global audience:**

It was mentioned in the syllabus of 2018 for undergraduate students that this semester they will learn various Indian techniques and tools used in translation studies. With introduction of these techniques they were also to be made aware of terminologies used in translation studies.

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Distance education gives the knowledge of cultural awareness to the learners (Starkey, 1998; Freedman & Liu, 1996; DeVillar & Faltis, 1991). As this SLM was to be posted as open source for the first time, there was a dire need to make it compatible with the global audience and cultures of various countries. That is why; keeping the paucity of space and time, the author had to introduce 93-100 tables in which the translation scenarios of different countries of the world (approx. 90) were given.

#### **English as lingua franca [ELF]: Use of Communicative English:**

SLM titled *Translation and Translation Studies* were written for the students of English of ICDEOL who opted for English as a Major subject. At the very beginning, it was important to give exposure to these students and also introduce them to the other varieties of Englishes as in coming future English will be their lingua franca (ELF) for sure. This approach will be a bit slightly different from being absolutely learner-centric as the scholars mentioned in the bracket believed (Prince, 2004; Weimer, 2002; Felder & Brent, 1996). But there was a need to focus on fluency and spoken aspect of English language to make it more communicative which made it learner-centric. That is why the writers had to keep in mind that in no way the quality of course material is diluted. As we all know that the parameters of UNESCO for education are: access to education and quality education (Raffaghelli, 2014). It is also worth mentioning here that many bonafied students of Himachal Pradesh are from rural background. For them understanding academic English is a tough task (it becomes tougher when there is less communication between the learners and the teacher). We all know that learning is made easy with social networking (Conole, 2007). Social platforms on internet really influence learning habits. Anil Kumar believes that the study habit of distance learners matter a lot. But the course developed by the instructors should also have some impact on the learner. SLM itself should rather help cultivate healthy reading habits in learners. Even Yu-Chun Kuo believes that the design of lessons created by the instructor can be the indicator of the satisfaction in distant learner. For Tuomi the real openness of Educational Resource (ER) is the right of reader to modify it. As a first step the writers gave editing rights to the learners of ICDEOL and anyone who downloaded the copy of lessons posted on online platform. It was observed that the learners of ICDEOL frequently use social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp as they commonly communicate in English there. For learners using these platforms is a way to see English as a language of love (or influencing the other gender), friendship and social status. That is why there was a need to introduce "student perspective" and using participatory research into education (Pinter and Zandian, 2015). These social online platforms are actually now deciding the reading habits of distance learners in India. Keeping in view all these parameters, it was decided to notice the behavior of these learners while they were given opportunity to access SLM. The learners were encouraged to download SLMs from academia.edu which requires login through Facebook or Gmail. It was observed that almost 99% students logged in to Academia.edu through Facebook.

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#### **Use of SLM as an Open Source :**

Peter and Deimann (2013) and Materu (2004) also believe that this is the decade of openness of education. But the study of Masterman and Wild (2011) is well suited to the scenario of ICDEOL. They explored that in the universities of UK there is no policy document which includes OER into learning and accreditation. As mentioned above the lesson writers engaged by ICDEOL have to keep in view COUP framework (costs, outcomes, use and perceptions) before writing lessons. But we cannot undermine the role of course design and delivery or launching platform of OERs (Lea 2005, p. 187). These lessons were to be distributed in a traditional way. There were to be sent to the distant learners through postal department or courier services. ICDEOL as of now does not provide students with the soft copy of lessons. For the author who wished to post these lessons there were unlimited digital resources available online (Leacock and Nesbit 2007). So there was problem in finding a suitable platform for SLMs. Basing his research on 31,216 articles, Niyazov and Richard Price (the founder of Academia.edu) in one of their research papers observed that "a paper in median impact factor journal uploaded to Academia.edu receives 16% more citations after one year that a similar article not available online." They also: "found that articles also posted to Academia.edu had 58% more citations than articles only posted to other online venues, such as personal and departmental home pages, after five years" (*Academia.edu*). The present author shared the book on www.academia.edu. This made the lesson open to be accessed by everyone, including learners of ICDEOL.

#### **Impact of Putting SLM as Open Source:**

OERs must help the learners "to gain access to the best possible resources and to have more flexible materials" (Hylén, 2006, p.54). The reputation of the institution and the writer also matters (Jung, Sasaki & Latchem, 2016; Hatzipanagos, Kasule, McKellar & Warburton, 2014; Kawachi, 2013; Masterman & Wild, 2011). One way to have proper QA (Quality Assurance) of OERs is to have

it reviewed by the peers (D'Antoni, 2009; Hylan, 2006). But if OERs get greater national and international exposure as also are recommended and appreciated by the authorities in the same field then it surely has greater significance for learners. Such OERs will give tough competition to the canonized brands of reputed writers and publishers. Higher the image and quality of OER, higher will be the benefit to the learners. See, for example, SLM titled *Translation and Translation Studies* (ICDEOL), when posted on academia.edu was read by different professors, teachers and students of translation studies. Prof Ernst Wendland of Stellenbosch University while recommending this book also remarked:

This is an excellent study of translation principles and practices, with an application to many different settings of use in the world today. It is a wonderful resource for all of those who are interested in the field of translation studies. (academia.edu)

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Thereafter, it was also recommended by Prof Kiran Pishkar of ELL and ELT, Jieroft Branch and Rekha Rao, Professor, Ancient History and Archeology University of Mysore. A teacher from Vietnam proposed to introduce it as a course/textbook for her college students (Academia.edu). The book got 2209 hits (paper rank 2.9) on one page as it got 1819 hits (paper rank 2.1) on the website of Prof Ernst Wendland. All these recommendations helped boost the confidence level of distant learners. The OER metamorphoses learners into co-producers (McCullough 2009).

Unique Visitors	Downloads	Countries	Research Fields
1000	899	149	482

Fig 1. Altmetric of SLM: Translation and Translation Studies (Academia.edu)

#### Impact on the Result of Students:

As mentioned earlier, the positive comments from the scholars of the same field about SLM boosted confidence of students. They found it more tempting to read what was written in this book. The higher rate of views on online platform surely magnified their interest. As a result there was high as 98 % pass percentage in the subject concerned with more than 80% students getting distinction in this paper.

#### Limitations:

But the concerns of Richard B Standiford in his "Distance Education and New Models for Forestry Education" are genuine: "The trend of shared online coursework available from a range of academic institutions includes the risk of further weakening...programs at individual universities." ICDEOL and the writers writing SLMs for distance learners have to keep in mind the economic factor before producing these notes. If in future all notes are posted online as OER for everyone then it would perhaps dilute the propensity of our courses. No doubt, the non-targeted learners from the world over were also widely attracted by SLM titled *Translation and Translation Studies* but it is very difficult to know the further usage of these notes by non-targeted learners (as no acknowledgement or reference of 2000 downloads could be found even after four months) when these references were searched on Google.

#### Conclusions:

The author has shared his first experiences of placing lessons on online platform as open source or free-to-access/modify SLMs. This paper discusses some opportunities, challenges and lessons learnt after putting SLM of distant learners as OER on online platform for the first time. SLM was appreciated by scholars in this field which actually motivated learners to read it and magnified the pass percentage as also reading habit. But the unreported usage of SLM remains an issue worth pondering.

#### Notes

1. The SLM titled *Translation and Translation Studies* is divided into six parts : Unit I: Introduction to Translation; Unit II: Approaches to Translation; Unit III: Methods of Translation ; Unit IV:Problems of Translation; Unit V: Translation in India and the final Unit VI which includes important terminologies used in translation studies.

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