Can a Learner be Prevented from Dropping Out by Achieving Consonance: An Inquest?

Anurag Saxena, [2]Vibha Joshi & G. Radhakrishna
School of Management,
Indira Ghandi National Open University,
110068, New Delhi, India
anurags@ignou.ac.in

[2]School of Education
Indira Ghandi National Open University
110068, New Delhi, India

Abstract

Distance Education System has attained enough age so as to be called a fairly mature system. It has delivered many advantages as well as disadvantages. There is still lack of knowledge about some very significant things. Present communication attempts to address one such issue i.e. about dropouts. The question "why open learners fail to complete their course of studies in spite of being highly motivated at the initial stages?" still haunts many policy makers. Present communication attempts to build a framework around Cognitive Dissonance theory to suggest measures that can inculcate positivism among dropouts and thus reduce their number.

Abstrak

Sistem Pendidikan Jarak Jauh telah menjangkau umur yang mencukupi untuk dipanggil sistem yang agak matang. Ianya telah memberi banyak kelebihan dan juga kelemahan. Masih terdapat kekurangan pengetahuan tentang beberapa perkara yang agak penting. Komunikasi ini cuba untuk mengenal pasti salah satu isu tersebut iaitu keciciran. Soalan "Mengapa pelajar pembelajaran terbuka gagal untuk melengkapkan pengajian mereka walaupun mereka mempunyai motivasi yang tinggi pada peringkat awal?" masih lagi menghantui banyak pembuat dasar. Komunikasi ini cuba untuk membina satu rangka kerja di sekeliling Teori Kognitif Disonan yang mengemukakan kaedah yang memupuk semangat positif dalam kalangan mereka yang tercicir dan seterusnya mengurangkan bilangannya.

Introduction

The distance education system is a huge and complex system. It has huge number of learners, programmes, courses, operations and also problems in managing these operations. It is a complex system as there are lots of obstacles in ensuring support to the huge number of learners. While many things go to its advantage, there are some things, which work as disadvantages. Simonson and Schlosser (1995) postulated that in order to be successful, a distance education system should try to generate tools that put the learning experience of the distant learner at par with that of the local learner. According to Parer (1995), quality in distance teaching is based on a well-structured design plus dialogue and communication. These designs are based on Moore's (1973) three-dimensional theory of distance education with learner dialogue and structure i.e. the learner is independent, he interacts with the instructor and element of course design thereby responds to his needs. Moore views highly structured programmes as more "distant" than low-structured programmes with high dialogue. However even after making sustained efforts to make programmes "less distant", distance education systems have not achieved complete success in this regard. This is the biggest disadvantage that distance education faces as compared to conventional education. For example quite a big chunk of open learners drop out midway in their educational pursuit. One of the main features of open learners is that they are a motivated lot. The distance education system caters to motivated, self-independent and aware individuals. The system caters educational facilities to all those who aspire for it and enroll them for the courses or programmes as per their needs and professional updation. However, there seems to be less agreement to above statements with respect to completion rates of open learners. These completion rates vary from programme to programme. This creates confusion among distance education system. The question arises why open learners fail to complete their course of studies in spite of being highly motivated at the initial stages.

Different methods as well as different systems for activating distance learning are described in the literature. Each system has advantages and disadvantages, which are clearly related to the method of activation. Each system requires different considerations for assimilation of the learning process. This article attempts to present the cognitive dissonance theory as

a means for reducing the dropouts and thus increasing the effectiveness of distance learning systems.

Why Learners Drop?

There are lots of myths about dropouts. There are beliefs that learners drop out because of personal circumstances, initial expectations, quality of college facilities or to take up employment etc. On the other hand good curriculum design, teaching methods and teacher-learner and learner-learner relationships will have greater impact on dropout rather than the measures that improves facilities. Another trend showing study by Hargreaves (2001) found out that learners have a tendency to look for more lucrative courses time and again. According to Hargreaves (2001), "With foreign learners making up more than half the pool of US physics graduate learners, it's not surprising that educators are worried by the seemingly disproportionate numbers who switch, mid-PhD, into areas such as computer science and engineering." Sharma (2002) further explained the reasons that enhance learners' chances to drop. He quoted Garland (1993) who categorised various reasons given by learners for withdrawing from distance learning courses into four groups:

Situational - these arise from a learner's own life circumstances, such as changed employment situation.

Dispositional - personal problems that influence the learner's persistence behaviour, such as learning styles and motivation.

Institutional - difficulties learners encounter with the institution, such as limited support services.

Epistemological - difficulties faced by learners while apprehending course content. Let us see some examples of these reasons.

Table 1   Why learners drops?

No.	Typology	Description
1	Dispositional	Placed on inappropriate programmes/courses
2	Dispositional	Find it difficult to identify peers
3	Dispositional	Find that course is not interesting/ beneficial
4	Dispositional	Have obtained fee waiver or reduction
5	Epistemological	Face difficulty at the start of course/programme
6	Institutional	Applied to college late
7	Institutional	Find that the quality of teaching is not good
8	Situational	Feels that courses is not job oriented
9	Situational	Males
10	Situational	Have difficult family and financial circumstances

Source: Based on UK Report (1999) and Garland M.R. (1993)

According to Garland (1993), situational and dispositional barriers proved to be the primary causes of attrition in distance education. However there are possibilities of epistemological and situational reasons as the main reasons, Hargreaves (2001). The above table helps us in exploring the types of problems that contributes in learner's decision to drop. We will give some examples from these factors and discuss how these factors are addressed by cognitive dissonance theory.

Distance Education & Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957) can be applied here to build a model with the help of ICT that can be employed in the Distance Education System to reduce the dropout rates. Cognitive Dissonance Theory seems to have direct implications in analysing the reasons under four major types. It can be used to analyse the reasons behind dropouts and led the learners to a compromise that would be positive in nature. Festinger (1957) postulated the Cognitive Dissonance Theory and commented, "There is a tendency for individuals to seek consistency among their cognitions (i.e., beliefs, opinions). When there is an inconsistency between attitudes or behaviors (dissonance), something must change to eliminate the dissonance. In the case of a discrepancy between attitudes and behavior, it is most likely that the attitude will change to accommodate the behavior".

In order to see the relevance or applicability of cognitive dissonance in the Distance Education System, a brief description of the theory is a must. According to Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, cognition is used in different connotations. It could refer to the mental processes of an individual or an act of knowledge. Dissonance is disagreement or a conflict of people's opinions or actions or characters. Kearsley (2005) stated that "according to cognitive dissonance theory there is a tendency for individuals to seek consistency among their cognitions (i.e., beliefs, opinions). When there is an inconsistency between attitudes or behaviors (dissonance), something must change to eliminate the dissonance". Dissonance occurs when there is a conflict between attitudes and behavior. The more are the conflicts, the more are the dissonant beliefs. Kearsley (2005) recommended that these dissonant beliefs must be reduced, nullified or changed/replaced.

Research Question

The question, "why open learners fail to complete their course of studies in spite of being highly motivated at the initial stages?" was the starting point of our discussion. The hypothesis that can we build a framework around Cognitive Dissonance Theory to suggest measures that can inculcate positivism among dropouts and thus reduce their number has to be tested. For this it is proposed to make a simple use of the proposed theory with the help of ICT. Hence the title, "Can a learner be prevented from dropping out by achieving consonance: An inquest?"

Methodology

The work of the system here is that it should identify all the dissonant beliefs that haunts open learners and try to add more and more consonant beliefs so that dissonance ceases to exist. Matz, David C.,Wood and Wendy (2005) demonstrated effect of group-induced dissonance. They found that the dissonance is attributed to lack of choice and opportunity to self-affirm. They asserted that this dissonance could be reduced through a variety of interpersonal strategies to achieve consensus.

The institute's website acts as one of the interfaces that connect the learner that is sitting at a distance with the institute and the faculty. Using the website and other ICT tools can actually act as a starting point for using

cognitive dissonance theory for reducing dropouts. The methodology of consonant the proposed system can be seen in the Figure 1.
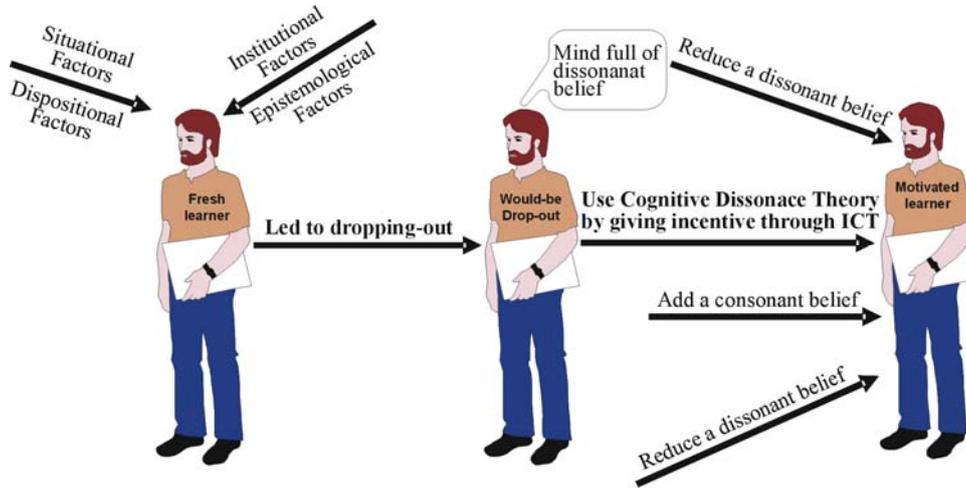
Figure 1   Framework around cognitive dissonance theory to reduce dropouts

According to Smith (1999), cognitive dissonance can motivate and challenge learners to think critically about their beliefs and cognitions, thereby enabling learning. It has implications for instructional designers. The distance learner in particular has much cognition as he is separated from his peers. When a dissonance comes in between he must be given some incentive so that he achieves consonance. This is exactly what we have proposed in our framework. We will take many examples in the subsequent sections to explain this framework.

Some Examples to Eliminate Dissonance in Distance Education

There are many examples of explaining the aforesaid ways to eliminate dissonance. We will quote three such examples in order to explain what this theory is all about. We will then try to emulate a distance learner with this, in order to highlight the usefulness of this theory to the cause of dropouts.

Table 2   Some examples to eliminate dissonance

No.	Reference	Problem	Dissonance	Reduce*	Add*	Change*
1	Wikipedia (2005)	Purchasing a brand of washing machine thinking that it is the best brand.	There is a better washing machine out on the market (as seen in an advertisement).	A person would purposely avoid other washing machine advertisements knowing that the decision had been made.	Finding out about other products could lead to some discomfort.	One may deride the new improved washing machine, and perceive the new advertisement as untrue.
2	Kearsley (2005)	Someone buys an expensive car.	Discovers that it is not comfortable on long drives.	It does not matter since the car is mainly used for short trips.	Focusing on the cars strengths such as safety, appearance, handling.	Getting rid of the car.
3	Barker (2003)	I am 100% sure the Earth is round!	When an alternative view is presented.	I'll never venture beyond the town where I live, so it does not matter if the Earth is flat or round.	The Earth casts a round shadow on the moon, so it is possible the Earth is round.	Magellan circumnavigated the Earth, so it cannot be flat.

Now let us take the case of a distance learner who has taken admission in a particular programme. There could be many dissonances but for instance, take a particular dissonance such as programme not worthy of wasting time upon. In order to reduce the importance of this dissonant belief, one can say that it does not matter since you are not using this time in other fruitful activities either. To add more consonant belief that outweigh the dissonant belief one can say that education does not go waste and there is no harm in completing the programme. To change the dissonant belief and remove inconsistency one can prove the utility of the programme or show the job profile of his seniors. Here are some examples from the educational context.

Table 3   Some examples from the Distance Education System

No	Problem	Dissonance	Reduce*	Add*	Change*
1	Studying for B.Ed through distance education is not the best option for me.	There is a better market acceptability for regular B.Ed.	I have to continue on my job so I cannot do regular B.Ed.	Even regular B.Ed programmes have their own problems.	I am learning while earning and this is best way to get a govenment recognised degree.
2	Joined an expensive international MBA programme through DE.	Discovers that it is not worth the money spent.	It does not matter since anyhow I will get an international degree.	Focusing on the programme's strengths such as exposure, knowledge and Qualifications.	Job profiles of the past batch is extremely good.
3	Distance education system requires a lot of self-initiation.	Missed the scheduled activities for registration, exams, and assignments.	It does not matter, as DE is flexible enough to give me more chances.	There are three to four simple things that one need to remember and rest of the procedures are simple.	Had I missed this in conventional system, my year would have wasted.

Discussion

Stone and Cooper (2001) commented, "By focusing on the cognitive processes by which people interpret their behavior, detect the presence of a discrepancy, experience and label their arousal, and seek a strategy for its reduction, we believe that dissonance theory can move forward in new directions that continue to present important insights into human social behavior". There have been many application of cognitive dissonance theory in the field of Education, Management and Social Sciences.

Cognitive Dissonance is associated with the negative influence. It is therefore one to focus on getting rid of the discomfort situation. Dropping out is one of the easiest ways to end the discomfort situation. Achieving consonance can make the learner escape from dropping out. According to Harmon-Jones (2004) dissonance results when one "freely chooses" to engage in behavior that is inconsistent with an attitude or belief. One must try to change attitudes and behavior of those learners that are "possible

dropouts". Khare, Saxena and Garg (2004) has discussed a model for identifying such learners who can be deemed as "possible dropouts".

Let us see some examples of motivational remedies for "would be" dropouts. We have already listed the reasons attributed for dropping out e.g. placed on inappropriate programmes/courses, find it difficult to identify peers, find that course is not interesting/beneficial, have obtained fee waiver or reduction, face difficulty at the start of course/programme, applied to college late, find that the quality of teaching is not good, feels that courses is not job oriented, have difficult family and financial circumstances. Let us see the first reason, "placed on inappropriate programmes/courses". The motivational ways for reducing this dissonance is to enable this learner to purposely avoid information about other programmes and courses knowing that the decision had been made. He should think it in this way that it does not matter since education never goes waste etc. To add a consonant belief, we can apprise him on the strengths of the programme he is pursuing. To change his dissonant belief, we may give counter reasons that deride his dissonance and bring consonance e.g. this degree is recognised for all the public sector jobs while the "better programme" that has created dissonance in him is acceptable in the private sector only.

We have tried to build a framework as to how "Cognitive Dissonance Theory" can help in bringing a change in attitude and behavior in a learner that is hell-bent on dropping out. There are many ways to do this. We have to build a repository of positive thoughts in the form of frequently asked questions (FAQs) and put them on the university website. The link should be propagated to all those "would be" dropouts. There are already some initiatives towards this. For example IGNOU's website contains a link http://www.ignou.ac.in/stridehandbook2/section7.pdf which tells the learners about studying: What, when and how. Section 5 of the websites tells about time management: How can I find time? So the importance should be given to develop such resources, which act as dissonance crunchers.

Conclusion

The phenomenon that use of technological systems excites the students during the early stages, because of its innovative nature, has been

presented in the literature. However, when the systems are introduced in the prolonged use, as an integral part of the learning process, the motivation to learn via technological systems decreases. Thus, the initial halo of using technological systems decreases as the learning process progresses. This is why an external motivational factor is so important (for example a certificate that the student receives at the end of the course). The dropout without an external motivational factor is very high. We propose to activate the suggested method as and when a learner feels distracted and starts lacking motivation to complete the programme that he has joined. The logic of the claim that by achieving consonance one can reduce dropouts lies in the fact that when such a system is activated, a dialogue is initiated. Again, as per Moore (1973), a high dialogue has lot of positive effects on the learner. Activation of online counseling acts a mentor to the learner. Instead of teaching him the system fills the demotivated learner with a lot of positivism that eventually enables him to complete the programme.

We would end with a piece of advice for the "would be" dropouts by quoting McKay and Fanning (1990), "I seek knowledge in order to make wiser choices. My daily job is to broaden my knowledge. I can do whatever I want, but what I want is determined by what I know".

References

Barker, P. (2003). Cognitive Dissonance. Retrieved August 22, 2005, from http://www.beyondintractability.org/m/cognitive_dissonance.jsp

Festinger, L. (1957). A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance. Stanford University, Stanford, California.

Garland, M.R. (1993). Learner Perceptions of the Situational, Institutional, Dispositional, and Epistemological Barriers to Persistence. Distance Education, *14*(2), pp. 181−198 as quoted in Sharma Ramesh (2002).

Hargreaves, L. (2001). Dropout rate among Chinese physics PhD learners seems high; community considers why? Physics Today. New York: *54*(5), p. 24.

Harmon-Jones, E. (2004). Contributions from research on anger and cognitive dissonance to understanding the motivational functions of asymmetrical frontal brain activity. Biological Psychology. *67*, pp. 51−76.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_dissonance for various definitions. Site accessed during July−August 2005.

http://www.ignou.ac.in/stridehandbook2/section7.pdf

Kearsley, G. (2005). Explorations in Learning & Instruction: The Theory Into Practice Database. Retrieved from http://tip.psychology.org/index.html

Khare, P., Saxena, A. & Garg, S. (2004). Performance Analysis of IGNOU Science Learners in Theory Courses through Data Mining. *Indian Journal of Open Learning*, *13*(1), pp. 29–49.

Matz, David C., Wood & Wendy. (2005). Cognitive dissonance in groups: The consequences of disagreement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Washington: January 2005. Vol. l.88, Issue. 1, p. 22.

McKay, M. & Fanning, P. (1990). Self Esteem, New Harbinger Publications Inc.: Oakland, CA, USA.

Moore, M. (1973). Towards a theory of independent learning & teaching. *Journal of Higher Education*, *44*, pp. 661–679.

Parer, M.S. (1995). Good distance teaching: Quality distance teaching = structured design + dialogue + communication. One world many voices – Quality in Open & Distance Learning, Vol. 2, 17th World conference proceedings of ICDE, Birmingham, UK.

Sharma, R.C. (2002). Learner Retention in Open and Distance Learning System in proceedings of 15th annual Asian Association of Open Universities conference held in New Delhi on 21–23 February 2002.

Simonson, M. & Schlosser, C. (1995). More than fiber: Distance Education in Iowa. *Tech Trends*, *40*(3), pp. 13–15.

Smith, K. (1999). Cognitive Dissonance. Retrieved Aug 22, 2005, from http://coe.sdsu.edu/eet/articles/cogdisthry/index.htm. San Diego State University.

Stone, J. & Cooper, J. (2001). A Self-Standards model of cognitive dissonance. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. 0022-1031/01, Academic Press.