Abstract

The question of how students in higher education approach their academic work has been investigated by a number of researchers including, Marton and Saljo (1976 a,b) and Entwistle et al. (1979) who developed the notion of approaches to learning. According to Marton and Saljo, the object of a person's attention during learning can be conceived as varying on a qualitative dimension being either on the surface of the discourse [the text per se / the sign] leading to surface approach or on the intentional content of the discourse [what is signified by the sign] leading to deep approach to learning. The concept of approaches to learning is very useful in understanding why students react differently to the same circumstances.

Available research evidence suggested that deep approach to learning based on wide reading, relating new knowledge to what is already known etc. results in better learning; whether better is defined as complexity of outcome [Marton & Saljo, 1976a,b; Biggs, 1978b; Saljo, 1981]; self-rated performance in comparison with peers or examination results (Svensson, 1976; Watkins & Hattie, 1981; Thomas & Bain, 1982).

Since the original work of Marton and Saljo, it has been found that the surface/deep distinction can be applied to a variety of learning situations and not simply to
learning from text [Entwistle & Ramsden. 1983; Marton et al. 1984; Ramsden, 1985]. It has also been observed that a conscious use of appropriate learning strategies characterises 'good' learners in a variety of studies and fields (Wendon, 1985; Oxford, 1986 a, b). However, no study exploring the issue of using specific approaches to learning by students of management course could be located.

New concepts of learning like the life-long learning for individual and the evolution of institutions of continuing education are being put into practice. Open university is one such institution. It is strikingly different from traditional university in its philosophy, structure and functions. The features that distinguish open university from traditional university relate to the nature of differences on three broad dimensions namely: learner, content and context respectively. A comparative evaluation of the learning effectiveness under two systems would require that the relevant variables under each dimension are identified and measured and how these influence approaches to learning (a crucial variable in student learning) and academic accomplishments of students both in open and traditional universities.

This study was designed to determine if students in open university adopt different approaches to learning than students in traditional university because of differences in
learner, content and context characteristics and thus have differences in their academic performance.

Some of the hypotheses tested were as follows:

1. Students in open university will significantly differ from students in traditional university in terms of learner, content and context characteristics.

2. Students in open university will significantly differ from students in traditional university in their approaches to learning.

3. Learner, content and context characteristics will significantly correlate with approaches to learning and academic performance of students both in open and traditional universities.

4. Academic performance will significantly correlate with approaches to learning of students both in open and traditional universities.

5. Academic performance could reliably be predicted by using learner, content and context characteristics and approaches to learning of students both in open and traditional universities as predictors.

The universe of population for the present study comprised of all the students of course in Diploma in Management Studies under one open and two traditional universities. The selection of sample was done by following a three-stage procedure. In the first stage, information
regarding the open university (i.e. IGNOU) and the variety of courses it offered was obtained. In the second stage, information regarding study centres was bagged in. In the third stage, the final sample selection was made.

The samples were drawn by following quota method of sampling. Out of 200 students selected for inclusion in sample, 100 students were drawn from open university, i.e., IGNOU (64 from Delhi region and 36 from Orissa region) and 100 were drawn from traditional university (68 from Delhi University and 32 from Utkal University Orissa). Due to the inadequate number of female students registered in the course, only male students were selected.

Matching variables consisted of course taken (DIM); nature of course (part-time); nature of students (sponsored candidates from all sectors having supervisory/ executive experiences) and gender of students (male only). Learner, content and context characteristics, approaches to learning and academic performance were the measured variables.

The instruments used were: A shortened version of Internal-External Control Scale [Rotter, 1966] to measure personality orientation; a modified version of Approaches to Studying Inventory [Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983] to assess approaches to learning and Student Perceptions Scale devised anew to measure learner, content and context characteristics respectively.
All the instruments were pilot tested, modified, and then finally administered. The underlying factor structure of the instruments were identified. Besides these three instruments, marks/grades obtained in the final examination were taken as an index of academic performance.

An ex-post facto research design was adopted for this study.

The statistical analyses included t-test, correlation and step-wise multiple regression analyses. The important findings of the study are listed below.

1. Students in open university differed significantly from those in traditional university in terms of their ultimate goals and perceptions of context characteristics. Significant differences were also found in the perceptions of overall content characteristics of students both in open and traditional universities in the city. It seemed that although students in open university possessed realistic goals and were satisfied with the quality of education, their experience of institutional climate was less positive as compared to students in traditional university. The later group perceived the environment for learning as more positive and supportive. Open university students were responsive to content characteristics like quality, presentation,
form of expression, language used, relevance of materials and assessment demands.

2. In metropoly, both open and traditional university students differed significantly from each other in the use of strategic approaches to learning. On surface and deep approaches they did not significantly differ. Traditional university students adopted strategic approaches more consistently as compared to students in open university. The later group showed a partial reliance on surface and deep approaches. The differences in approaches to learning are interpreted in terms of the students' intentions.

The deep approach is internal to the content of the article or problem, and to the knowledge, experience and interests of the learner. The surface approach is external towards the task and its requirements. The task is seen as an external imposition. The strategic approach is adopted with an intention of maximizing grades using whatever means available. Ramsden & Entwistle (1983) and Taylor et al. (1981) had reported marked differences between students at the open university and conventional university in terms of what benefits they expected to derive from higher education. The open university students showed predominantly personal goals, but the orientation could be external (compensating for earlier academic
failure) or internal (broadening horizons, interests, and capabilities). At the conventional university the students had mainly academic or vocational goals, but again these could be subdivided into extrinsic (grades/qualifications) and intrinsic (knowledge and skill) categories.

3. Some of the learner, content and context characteristics correlated significantly with approaches to learning of students both in open and traditional universities. The socio-familial set up of traditional university students in the metropoly exerted positive influence on their level of motivation which in turn, determined the adoption of specific approaches to learning. In a similar vein, one's goal patterns and goal commitment whether immediate or deferred exerted maximum influence on one's study behavior.

The quality of instruction and relevance of materials significantly correlated with approaches to learning of students both in open and traditional universities. Students in classroom-based education perceived the assessment demand more conspicuous as compared to students in distance education programme. This fostered reliance on strategic approaches to learning. This finding is in perfect agreement with that of
Of all the context characteristics included in the study, the mode of delivery and employment potential of the programme correlated significantly with approaches to learning of students both in open and traditional universities.

4. Some of the learner, content and context characteristics significantly correlated with academic performance of students both in open and traditional universities. Academic performance of students in traditional university in the city significantly correlated with ultimate goals [learner characteristic]; relevance of materials [content characteristic]; and employment potential [context characteristic] respectively. Academic performance of open university students in the city correlated significantly with the presentation and feedback system. The positive association of academic performance with feedback system was also supported by Tuckman (1990 b).

5. Students in open and traditional universities in city differed significantly from each other on academic performance. Students in traditional university outperformed those in open university. The finding of significant difference in academic performance found support in Panda's (1980) findings. He found regular
students performed better than students undergoing correspondence courses at Utkal university.

6. The academic performance of students in open and traditional universities correlated significantly with some dimensions of approaches to learning. The finding of positive association between academic performance and approaches to learning supported the findings of Ramsden and Entwistle (1983); Das and Kirby (1984) and Ramsden et al. (1989). Duckwall et al. (1991), also reported relationship between success of the programme and approaches to learning.

7. Approaches to learning adopted by students both in open and traditional universities could not be reliably predicted by using learner, content and context characteristics as predictors.

8. The academic performance of students in traditional university in the metropoly could be better predicted by taking deep, surface and strategic approaches to learning as predictors, than by using learner, content and context characteristics as predictors.

The findings of the present study seemed to have several important implications for students, educators, course designers, programme evaluators, administrators and policy makers. Some of these are discussed below.

Students need to be aware of their own intentions,
goals, motives, study orientations, task demands and salient features of learning environment as these factors profoundly affected approaches to learning. Saljo (1979) reported that people who were aware of their learning in different respects were more likely to adopt a deep level approach in their learning experience of everyday life and in studying. Students should accept that their own methods and ways of approaching academic work are not the optimal one and can be changed, if appropriately manipulated. Biggs & Rihn's (1984) study showed marked shifts from the surface approach towards the deep and achieving approach following an intervention programme.

Educators need to be aware of the possible interplay of learner, content and context characteristics and their relation to approaches to learning and academic performance of students. Since the foremost duty of the educators is to help students learn, they can best perform this by assisting students to change the conception of learning and to be aware of their own learning processes. Students gain awareness when they are encouraged to articulate their own thoughts. It is through this process that student's oversimplifications and naive conceptions are revealed. Teachers should be qualified not only to teach the respective subject matter but also to teach students how to learn this subject matter well.
Course designers need to be aware of the supplanting effect of cues in learning materials which may enable students to avoid taking an active part in the learning process. While designing the course materials, provision should be made to consider the development of the learner's study strategies in compliance with content related characteristics. Course contents should be structured and organised in such a way so that students can automatize their use of learning strategies appropriate to the task and situation.

Administrators should realize that the atmosphere created by the interaction between staff and students, and; between teaching staff and clerical staff influenced student's perceptions of the institution as a whole. They should be very careful while implementing the policies and executing various programmes as these implicitly regulate students' learning behavior.

Open university courses (particularly DIM) are designed to ensure analytical and conceptual comprehension of the materials along with application of ideas to the job situation. Only by adopting a deep/holistic approach the student is led to relate and reflect on items of knowledge acquired. A cursory examination of students' approaches to learning revealed that these objectives are not actualized by the students. They exhibited only a partial reliance on
deep approach. They instead tended to adopt rote method of learning; uncritically accepting the contents etc. Although students perceived the course materials as qualitative and enriched, they perhaps lacked the motivation to focus on the intentional aspect of the materials. Policy makers should take note of this and should try to ensure conditions of deep learning. This can be done by creating an optimal learning conditions and a supportive environment. Steps should be taken to enhance student motivation in contact programmes and to maximize the compliance among course contents, pedagogy and the very manner in which students study. Qualitative face-to-face feedback should be given in detail to those who need it particularly (as opposed to the written form) with suggestions for needed change. Strategy of contextualizing knowledge can be adopted to enhance the potential attractiveness of the task and to raise the intrinsic motivation of students. This can be done by providing information to students about the context on which the knowledge (either procedural or conceptual) might be used.

The present study also suffered from some limitations. Firstly, the independent and interactive effects of several cognitive and non-cognitive factors like intelligence, creativity, cognitive style, personality, etc. on approaches to learning and academic performance could not be studied, in view of the scope of the problem as well as
physical accessibility of students in open university. Secondly students' approaches to learning across different academic subjects or disciplines could not be studied for the lack of comparativeness of courses.

The problem should further be explored using pre-post research design and with larger sample. The efficacy of tools used in the study should further be tested. The effects of gender and age on approaches to learning of students should be explored. The relation between approaches to learning and academic performance should be studied by including other indicators of academic performance like self-ratings or peer-ratings etc., besides marks/grades obtained in the examination. The results of the present study may be extended to examine other levels of education.