

Challenges of Conducting Interdisciplinary Refresher Course in Environmental Studies and Suggestions to Conduct it Effectively

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It was around 1997, in the IXth Five Year Plan that the University Grants Commission directed the Academic Staff Colleges based in different universities to conduct Refresher Courses in Environment Studies. It was a welcome step because by this time the significance of environment awareness was increasingly being felt and 'Environment studies' was being taught as a subject in undergraduate courses in many of the colleges and universities.

The objectives of these courses is to bring about a dynamic awareness of environmental issues, to build up motivation for adopting a civil activism, to solve the environmental problems prevalent in the society and to equip the teachers with some skills in the subject of environment so that she or he can hand over this knowledge and information to their respective students in the classrooms.

This offered an extremely valuable opportunity to apprise the teacher-participants regarding the fragile ecosystem and the role of human beings to preserve it. However, the conduct of this programme also brought forth several implicit challenges which if not wisely handled can turn the training programme into a total fiasco.

The Challenge of Heterogenous Audience

The nature of Refresher Course in Environmental Studies or Environmental Education was intentionally kept to be interdisciplinary in nature meaning thereby that teacher participants taking part in the courses can be drawn from varied disciplines. As a result the groups attending the Refresher Course in Environmental Studies will be heterogeneous with lecturers attending the

courses belonging to subjects as varied as languages, literature, performing and visual arts and humanities on one hand and core and applied science subjects on the other. While this brought enrichment to the interaction during the programmes it was really a challenging job on part of the coordinator to design course contents which will be equally relevant and comprehensive to the lecturers of such a diverse spectrum.

The Challenge of Consistency

While planning Refresher courses in Environment studies it will be wise not to make the contents too scattered in the whole scheme. Rather curriculum designing should be one of the important aspects in the pre planning of the programme on which the organizers and the coordinator should spend much time on to apply their minds on the basis of insights developed and feedback received from the earlier such programmes. Environment is a subject which is highly intersectoral and it is welcome to have experts with different perspectives on the topics. This certainly adds value to the programme but it should not be on the cost of consistency of the programme. The general trend in most of the Academic Staff Colleges is unfortunately to invite resource persons on the basis of convenience and not as per a well defined plan in which each expert handles a pre-specified area of the complete plan. With no preplanned course design in place the resource persons are invited in a haphazard manner. It is quite obvious that whosoever is available and ready to speak cannot necessarily be a good resource person. This chaotic situation does not help the overall spirit of the programme and in a short time

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participants get disillusioned. On top of it, mediocre resource persons speaking on general topics with nothing new in the content do not help the situation at all.

The Challenge to motivate

If the courses are not intelligently planned and wisely executed many of the teacher-participants instead of becoming enthusiastic environmentalists become wary of the term environment. After 3 weeks of getting bombarded by the heavy technical jargon of environment concepts which they cannot understand many teachers rather get demotivated and irritated by the mere mention of the word. They close their minds and start taking it as a much abused, clichéd concept, for which they cannot contribute actively at all. That the onus of organizing a Refresher Course (the focus is on fresh and not stale) in the most effective way is on the organizers and not the participants and the organizers must not lose this focus.

The Challenge of mandatory training

Another problem that is hampering the effectiveness of the programme is the participation of such teacher-participants who take this specialized interdisciplinary course akin to any other Refresher Course with the sole aim of fulfilling their eligibility for their next grade. In order to get over with the Refresher Courses which are mandatory for the lecturers to attend for their career advancement, many lecturers participate in the interdisciplinary Refresher Course in Environmental Studies two or three times in the same Academic Staff College in lieu of Refresher Course in their own discipline. Though technically interdisciplinary Refresher Courses are now considered equivalent to Refresher Course in specific disciplines a

teacher cannot be barred from attending these programmes. However, this surely tarnishes the gravity of the programme and disrupts the academic agenda. The objectives of the programme become meaningless if the same message is beamed to the same audience in the same way. The way out of this scenario is to develop some norms to allow a lecturer to attend interdisciplinary Refresher Course in Environmental Studies only once in his/her career. The lecturers should be encouraged to attend an assortment of orientation courses, subject specific, multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary refresher courses.

The Challenge of Appropriate Methodology

Refresher courses are attended by teachers who already have the experience of 4 to 6 year in the job, therefore, the best strategy towards effectiveness will be to have a course methodology which includes hands-on-sessions, workshops, interactions and other such non-traditional pedagogic techniques. The course curriculum can also be highly imaginative and innovative. There can be visits to labs and organizations, natural sties, forests, botanical gardens, wetlands. There can be campaigns, clean-up missions, competitions, advocacy, extension sessions and what not.

Environment is a subject where there cannot be any dearth of good ideas, it is really unforgivable if 35-40 participants are made to sit in a dark, closed room and listen to lectures delivered on highly technical and narrow areas of environment. If we are not utilizing these methods and not grabbing the opportunities to transform a whole generation of teachers into fanatic soldiers for the causes of environment the organizers are to be blamed and nobody else.

