COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES OF STUDY STRATEGIES AMONG HIGH AND LOW ACHIEVERS DISTANCE LEARNING STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this research is to better understand and draw perceptions of low and high achiever distance learners about their study patterns. The study indicates the areas where significant difference is found among low and high achievers of Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan through a self developed questionnaire covering their preferred study location, study times, number of hours spent on study, the difficulties affecting their study patterns and the organization of study strategies in comparative perspective. Greater difficulties were being faced by low achievers in their study. Increased difficulties were encountered by low achievers with study material, volume of study, self-motivation and other factors. There was no significant difference between low and high achievers for their study strategies of studying materials without taking notes and reading aloud. Greater low achievers attempted easy portions of their study material first and took notes simultaneously as compared to high achievers.

Keywords: Distance learning students, high achievers, low achievers, study strategies, difficulties for study.

INTRODUCTION

The Open University Students generally come from all walks of life. Most are working adults on full-time employment. Some of them are highly successful in their courses and achieve outstanding results. The sizeable percentage achieves fairly low results, indicating difficulty with meaningful learning. The primary role of any distance student is to learn which further requires motivation, planning, and the ability to analyze and apply the information being learnt. Distance learners may have some difficulty determining what the demands of a course of academic study actually are because they do not have the support of an immediate peer group, ready access to the instructor, or familiarity with the technology being used for delivery of the distance education course. They may be unsure of themselves and their learning. Yet, keeping in view the distance education system, the learning process of student becomes comparatively complex for the following limitations (Schuemer, 1993):

> ➢ Many distance-education students being mature and earning hand have to coordinate the different areas of their lives which influence each other—their families, jobs, spare time, and studies.

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- Distance-education students have different reasons for taking courses. Some students are interested in obtaining a degree to qualify for a better job. Many take courses to broaden their education and are not really interested in completing a degree.
- The motivational factors arising from the contact or competition with other students is usually found absent among distance-education students. The student also lacks the immediate support of a teacher who is present and able to motivate and, if necessary, give attention to actual needs and difficulties that crop up during study. That is why distance learner is considered isolated.
- Distant students and their teachers often have little in common in terms of background and day-today experiences and therefore, it takes longer for student-teacher rapport to develop. Without face-to-face contact distant students may feel ill at ease with their teacher as an individual and uncomfortable with their learning situation.
- Technology is involved for flow of information and communication. Communication is inhibited only when the teacher and students become comfortable with the technical delivery system.
- Global research yields that these characteristics are inherent also in the concept of distance education. They become manifest during the process of delivery.

Studying is the process that is used to decide what to learn and what to remember and recall. Study skills can be described as learning how to become an effective learner and how to manage your own learning. The term refers to the conscious and deliberate use of the processes of learning to achieve effective study practices. It deals with the idea that pupils and students can and should be helped to develop conscious, deliberate control over the mechanisms of their own learning.

The most obvious study skills are reading, writing, note-taking, time-management, working with others, engaging in critical and analytical thinking and revising and remembering. Many of the skills are best developed over a period of time. Good study habits provide a strong foundation for the learning that comes later. Properly developed notes typically reflect the ideas, concepts, methods, examples, and do's & don'ts that instructor believes to be important and will expect you to know well. Mastery of notes will be the best use of your time and is much more efficient than basing your study around the textbook. Study time focus on how long should a student plan for studying and how should it be used. Each person has certain times when they peak mentally.

STUDY HABITS AMONG DISTANCE LEARNERS

Teaching and learning at a distance is demanding. However, learning will be more meaningful and deeper for distance learners, if the students and their instructor share responsibility for developing learning goals and objectives; actively interacting with class members; promoting reflection on experience; relating new information to examples that make sense to learners; maintaining self-esteem; and evaluating what is being learned. Distance learners need to reflect on what they are learning. They need to examine the existing knowledge frameworks in their heads and how these are being added to or changed by incoming information.

Examinations, papers, and class presentations provide opportunities for student and teacher to evaluate learning. There are many different categories of learners:

> - some prefer to study independently
> - some prefer to be guided by the instructor
> - some prefer to study for understanding and process information at deep levels
> - some focus on reproduction of detail at a surface level (Bessant, 1997).

There are two major approaches for going through the assignments and examination attempt; first is to memorize the facts and details with poor understanding of course material and second is to master the new information by deep understanding of course material. These two approaches are as under: Surface approach and Deep approach

Surface Aproach

Distance-education students who are not confident about their learning tend to concentrate on memorizing facts and details in order to complete assignments and write exams. As a result, they end up with a poor understanding of course material with memorization of facts which can be entitled as 'surface approach to learning'. This type of approach may be characterized as follows (Morgan, 1991):

> - There is focus on the "signs" (e.g., the text or instruction itself)
> - There is focus on discrete elements
> - Learners memorize information and procedures for tests
> - Learners unreflectively associate concepts and facts
> - Learners fail to distinguish principles from evidence, new information from old
> - Learners treat assignments as something imposed by the instructor
> - External emphasis focusing on the demands of assignments and exams leading to a knowledge which as a result cut-off learners from everyday reality

Deep Approach

On the other hand some distance-education students become more selective and focus their learning to master new information. The focus of their learning is not based on surface approach but it is based on deeper understanding; which can be entitled as 'deep approach'. (Morgan (1991) summarizes this approach as follows:

> - There is focus on what is "signified" (e.g., the instructor's arguments).
> - Learners relate and distinguish new ideas and previous knowledge.
> - Learners relate concepts to everyday experience.
> - Learners relate and distinguish evidence and argument.
> - They organize and structure content.
> - Their internal emphasis is focusing on how instructional material relates to everyday reality.

IMPROVING STUDY APPROACHES AMONG DISTANCE LEARNERS

Adult students and their instructors must face and overcome a number of challenges before learning takes place including: becoming and staying responsible for themselves; owning their strengths, desires, skills, and needs; maintaining and increasing self-esteem; relating to others; clarifying what is learned; redefining what legitimate knowledge is; and dealing with content (Brundage *et.al.*, 1993). These challenges are considered in relation to distance education:

Encouragement
High motivation is required to complete distant courses because the day-to-day contact with teachers and other students is typically lacking. Instructors can help motivate distance learners by providing consistent and timely feedback, encouraging discussion among students, being well prepared for class, and by encouraging and reinforcing effective student study habits. Motivational factors have also an effect on students' levels of achievement (Eppler and Harju, 1997).

Exploring Strengths and Limitations
Students need to recognize their strengths and limitations. They also need to understand their learning goals and objectives. The instructor can help distance learners to explore their strengths/limitations and their learning goals/objectives by assuming a facilitative role in the learning process. Providing opportunities for students to share their personal learning goals and objectives for a course helps to make learning more meaningful and increases motivation. Achieving students were found often likely to seek help if they needed it and to do so in an effective and efficient way (Ryan and Hicks, 1997).

Balancing Responsibilities
Distance learners remain afraid to their ability to do well in a course. They have to balance many responsibilities including employment and supporting family. Often their involvement in distance education is unknown to those they work with and ignored by family members. Student performance is enhanced if learners set aside time for their instructional activities and if they receive family support in their academic endeavors. For adult students it is not surprising that social factors including work commitments, family orientation (Yamauchi and Li, 1993) and learning situation characteristics like a supportive environment can have an effect on level of their achievement (Hough, 1994).

Interaction and cooperation
Students often learn most effectively when they have the opportunity to interact with other students. Kennett *et.al.* (1996) reported that test performance improved for students who worked cooperatively with others. Interaction among students typically leads to group problem solving. When students are unable to meet together, appropriate interactive technology such as E-mail should be provided to encourage small group and individual communication.

Assignments in which students work together and then report back or present to the class as a whole, encourage student-to-student interaction so it is quite obvious to ensure clear directions and realistic goals for group assignments (Burge, 1993).

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OBJECTIVES

The major objectives of this research are as under:

> ➢ To highlight the present situation of study strategies among distance education students.
> ➢ To compare the study strategies of low and high achievers of distance learning students.
> ➢ To draw the preferences of distance learners about study location and study timing.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Population and Sampling

The population of this research consisted of all the distance education students of Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan. Whereas research was delimited to students enrolled in masters' level course workshop, semester Autumn 2007. These students were ranked on the basis of their results for Spring semester 2007. Among them 500 high achievers and 500 low achievers were considered as sample of the study.

Research Tool Development and Data Collection:

Since the study was descriptive in nature, survey was considered appropriate to collect the data. For this purpose, questionnaire was validated through experts' opinion and pilot testing on fifty low and fifty high achievers was conducted. The data collected through questionnaire were coded and analyzed through Ms- Excel in terms of mean scores. Scale values were assigned to each of the five responses ranged from 5-1 viz SA to SDA and to calculate the mean score, further standard deviation and t-value were calculated at $p < 0.05$.

FINDINGS

The findings are presented in five tables; the first describes the preferred study locations by distance learners; second is concerned with their preferred study times and third draws the number of hours spent on their study per week. Fourth table is related to the comparative perspectives of some major difficulties which might have effects upon their study patterns. These causes have direct influence on their study strategies adopted while remaining and struggling for good achievements in distance learning system of education offered by the University. The last table draws the organization of such study strategies adopted by both type of students entitled as low achievers and high achievers.

Table: 1 explores the preferences of low and high achievers in distance education about their study locations. Home as study location was preferred by 25% of low achievers whereas 24% high achievers showed their preferences in this regard. 29% respondents among low achievers preferred office for their study purpose; whereas 23% respondents were found among high achievers in this category. Library was declared as preferred study location by 23% low achievers and 22% high achievers. Other locations were declared as preferred study locations by 23% of low achievers and 31% of high achiever respondents.

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Table: 1
Preferred Study Location

Category	Preferred Study Location			
	Home	Office	Library	Others
Low Achievers	125 (25%)	145 (29%)	117 (23%)	113 (23%)
High Achievers	121 (24%)	113 (23%)	112 (22%)	154 (31%)

The results of table 1 indicate that similar patterns were found among low and high achievers for their preferred study locations of home and library. More preference for office as study location was assigned by low achievers. In sum, there are wide variations in study locations.

Table: 2
Preferred Study Times

Category	Preferred Study Times			
	Weekdays only	Weekends only	Throughout week	Occasionally
Low Achievers	283 (57%)	24 (05%)	104 (21%)	89 (18%)
High Achievers	247 (49%)	17 (03%)	123 (25%)	113 (23%)

Table: 2 reveals that 57% respondents among low achievers preferred weekdays only as their study time; 05% preferred weekends only. To study throughout the week was preferred by 21% whereas 18% of low achievers declared to have their study occasionally. Among high achievers 49% preferred weekdays only; 03% weekends only; 25% throughout the week and 23% occasionally. Not surprising that given the characteristics of distance education students in Pakistan, the most popular weekdays only for both groups (57% low achievers and 49% high achievers) preferred as their study time. Whereas weekends only were preferred by a few among both groups of respondents as it is obvious that weekends are reserved for social activities and family life engagements in Pakistan, and elsewhere. Thus study times are fairly individualized in character.

Table: 3 shows students' estimated number of hours spent in studying weekly. The majority among low achievers (49%) usually spent less than 5 hours studying per week whereas majority of high achievers (29%) spent 9-12 hours per week. 31% of low achievers and 28% of high achievers spent 5-8 hours per week for their study.

Table: 3
Number of Hours Spent on Study

Category	Number of hours spent on Study per week			
	Less than 5	5 - 8	9 -12	Above 12
Low Achievers	243 (49%)	157 (31%)	54 (11%)	42 (8%)
High Achievers	121 (24%)	138 (28%)	147 (29%)	94 (19%)

Spending above 12 hours per week for their study was committed by 08% of low achievers and 19% of high achievers. These variations indicate their level of appointments.

Table: 4
Causes of Difficulties Perceived

S #	Difficulties Perceived	Low Achiever		High Achievers		t-value
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
1	study materials	3.24	2.063	2.70	1.02	6.852*
2	volume of materials to study	3.21	2.207	2.55	1.10	8.143*
3	integration of study and other responsibilities	3.32	2.042	3.06	1.11	3.273*
4	writing skills	3.17	1.898	2.93	1.09	3.078*
5	Self-motivation	3.20	1.854	2.96	1.11	3.090*
6	anxiety about tests and exams	3.12	2.183	3.15	1.14	-0.417
7	finding time to study	3.26	1.916	2.91	1.17	4.433*
8	other commitments in social life	3.35	1.856	3.18	1.13	2.176
9	my spouse/family becoming annoyed	2.48	1.662	2.77	1.10	3.850*

Significant at 0.05 level

Table 4 indicates the extent to which a number of difficulties might have affected the study patterns of distance-education students. Group of low achievers indicated that they had comparatively greater difficulties than high achievers with the study materials ($t=6.852$, $p <0.05$), the volume of the study material ($t= 8.143$, $p <0.05$), integration of study with other responsibilities ($t=3.273$, $p <0.05$),

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their self-motivation (*t*=3.090, *p* <0.05), finding time for study (*t*=4.433, *p* <0.05), and their other commitments (*t*=2.176, *p* <0.05). Whereas, high achievers felt that they had comparatively greater difficulties with anxiety about test (*t*=-0.417, *p* <0.05) and their family becoming annoyed by their study engagement (*t*=-3.850, *p* <0.05).

It is obvious that these difficulties have direct relation and effects upon study patterns of distance learners and so further on their achievement. The commitments and responsibilities of distance learners for both groups indicate that that they have to arrange various other activities along with their study; which need to be taken under consideration for rescheduling their assignments at Open University. The concept of anxiety affecting the quality of learning is collaborative with many psychological studies and negatively related. This is established here as well.

Table: 5
Organization of Study Strategies

S #	Study Strategies	Low Achiever		High Achievers		t-value
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
1	Link previous knowledge with present assignment	2.66	1.21	3.11	1.033	-5.583*
2	Dividing lesson into parts	2.84	1.997	3.36	1.23	-6.507*
3	Attempt easy portions first	3.30	1.987	2.65	1.18	8.164*
4	Make notes simultaneously	3.25	2.13	2.95	1.14	3.905*
5	Study materials without underlining, taking notes	3.13	2.121	3.19	1.19	0.406
6	Go through materials underline/highlight important information	2.81	1.889	3.14	1.15	-7.645*
7	Build up own views of the material	2.78	1.914	3.60	0.86	-11.00*
8	Try to find examples from experience where knowledge applied	2.92	1.859	3.30	1.04	-5.070*
9	Write it after study	3.15	3.39	1.808	1.10	-3.201*
9	Study aloud	3.42	1.872	3.32	0.95	1.303

Significant at 0.05 level

Table: 5 draw the organization of study strategies among both groups of low and high achievers. Respondents among high achiever group were found comparatively greater intensity of frequency than low achievers for their study strategies of linking previous knowledge with present assignment (*t*=-5.583, *p* <0.05), dividing lesson into parts(*t*=-6.507, *p* <0.05), going through materials by underlining/highlighting important information (*t*=-7.645, *p* <0.05), building up own views of the

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material (t=-11.00, p <0.05), trying to find examples from experience where knowledge applied (t=-5.070, p <0.05), writing it after study (t=-3.201, p <0.05). Low achievers were found dominant to attempt easy portions first (t=8.164, p <0.05), to make notes simultaneously (t= 3.905, p <0.05), to study materials without underlining & taking notes (t= 0.406, p <0.05) and to study aloud (t=1.303, p <0.05).

CONCLUSIONS

Following conclusions were drawn from the findings of the research:

- ➢ Similar types of patterns were found among low and high achievers for their preferred study location. Home, office, library and other places were being used for study by both type of low achievers and high achievers with similar type of distributions.
- ➢ Both low and high achievers in distance learning preferred to organize their study during weekdays; organizing their study at only weekends was found casual.
- ➢ Studying less than five hours per week was frequent among low achievers; whereas high achievers frequently spent five to eight hours a week.
- ➢ Increased difficulties were encountered by low achievers with study material, volume of study, self-motivation and other factors.
- ➢ There was no significant difference between low and high achievers for their study strategies of studying materials without taking notes and reading aloud. It was reflected that both type of respondents took notes and read aloud for achieving command over their study patterns.
- ➢ Greater low achievers attempted easy portions of their study material first and took notes simultaneously as compared to high achievers.

DISCUSSION

Although it was a limited research with respect to resources, span of time and number of sampled students, but the implications arising from results drawn warrant considerations for further lines of action and future oriented provisions. The study focused on the comparative perspectives of study patterns among low and high achievers distance learners with respect to their preferred study locations, their preferred study timings, the number of hours spent on study a week, the causes and dimensions of difficulties that might have cause on their study patterns and organization of their study strategies.

Distance learning students in Pakistan and elsewhere are usually part-time students and are engaged in other jobs or family related tasks and private concerns. Generally they belong to disadvantage group: rural and female. The number of hours they can devote to their study becomes an important factor for their achievement and also for the distance education institutions to organize the study material and other related tasks which match and suit to their clientele. Majority of both low and high achievers spend less than the university's recommendation of 12-14 hours of study a week. To observe the reasons and formulate an in-built system for not following the study schedule set by Organization is considerably further researchable area.

It is assumed that distance learning students intensively utilize weekends for their study; but it was not confirmed in this study. It may be assumed for that in Pakistan only Sunday is holiday and Saturday remains working day. So the people remain engaged in social demands and family commitments.

All the distance learners look for ways to be more successful and strive to compete for other competitors; teachers seek ways to enrich student learning, and students search for ways to improve academic performance. The need for improvement in this area is therefore quite clear. Understanding exactly how to effect an improvement, however, depends upon an understanding of the learning process itself. Distance learner should establish a good physical environment, relax and set a positive attitude, review instructions, review lecture notes, preview the assignment and organize the thoughts while study process.

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