Introduction

This paper focuses on how distance teaching texts, through the use of activities, can actively promote learning. Such activities include all the exercises, assignments, and practical work the distance learners are asked to complete.

According to the authors of Writing for Distance Education, learning involves “acquiring information, understanding it, and applying it in practice” (1979, 12). In face-to-face teaching, active learning takes place quite easily because the teacher is physically present to guide, assist, motivate, and stimulate the students to think and make responses. In distance education, on the other hand, students do not have regular access to a teacher but have to study mostly by reading printed materials. There is, however, a very real danger that they may respond passively to such materials, since reading is normally a passive activity. Such a passive response can in turn militate against active learning. To avoid this it is vital for writers of distance education materials to write these materials in such a way that distance learners are deliberately made to respond actively to the printed matter.

One way in which this can be done effectively is by providing activities of the appropriate type and in the right amount, in which students can become actively involved.

The importance of activities

Activities in distance teaching materials are important because they serve a number of useful purposes that help in promoting active learning. By engaging in activities, learners are able to:

1. reinforce the information learnt;
2. monitor their progress by finding out their weaknesses and by
identifying the areas they need to revise further;
3 identify the important facts to be learnt, since activities normally centre on the important aspects of the content;
4 increase their motivation from the satisfaction they derive from completed work.

Activities for promoting active learning

Activities that promote active learning involve one or more of three things: thinking, writing, and doing practical work (Writing for Distance Education 1979, 17).

Thinking activities generally involve interpreting facts and making connections between them. There are a number of ways in which this can be stimulated in distance teaching materials. One way is to put headings and subheadings in the form of questions. Questions help direct readers' attention to what follows, encourage them to stop and think before reading, and generally keep them alert. Another way is to place questions within the text at the relevant places. Such questions encourage the students to pause for a moment, and stimulate them to reflect on what the question directs their attention to.

Writing activities promote active learning by forcing distance learners to work out answers actively and systematically. Such activities in distance teaching materials also help to discourage passive skimming and promote active reading and learning. Writing activities can take a number of forms. The objective-type activities require students to tick answers from given options or to write in the answer in a word or phrase. These include multiple-choice, true/false, matching, rearranging, and fill-in-the-blank types of exercises. The other type of writing activity requires learners to write a sentence answer, a short paragraph answer, or even an essay.

Practical activities involve doing things practically, such as carrying out experiments, doing field work, and so on. Effectively communicating practical instructions through printed materials can pose difficulties but these can be overcome by following some suggestions that are dealt with later in this paper.

Having looked at the kinds of activities one can use in distance teaching
texts, I want now to focus upon important features of how one should go about constructing them.

**Planning and constructing activities**

Holmberg notes in *Distance Education* that at times activities are “created more as a matter of routine than as a result of a close study of what is actually required . . .” (1982, 33-34). To avoid this unhealthy practice, a course writer needs to plan consciously the activities he wishes to include in the course at the various stages of its development. Before designing the activities he needs to find out the potential students who will be studying the course, the skills they already possess, and the skills they may need to practise or develop further. Also during the planning stage he needs to ask himself the following questions:

1. What is the purpose of each activity?
2. How much student time will the activities take for successful completion?
3. Are the activities appropriate to the learners and the subject?
4. Do the activities help the learners progress towards the objectives of the course?
5. Are the activities covering all the essential parts of the course?
6. Are there enough activities?

Only after having given conscious thought to these questions should a course writer engage in the actual construction of the activities in the distance teaching materials. Where the need arises for assistance, the writer should consult the course developers or instructional designers in the distance education system he/she is working with, for these people are assigned to help in the instructional design and development of that course.

In addition to giving conscious thought to the above questions, the writer, in constructing activities, needs to keep the following points in mind.

1. Activities should increase in complexity only gradually. If the first few activities are too difficult distance learners who encounter problems in doing these are likely to drop out.
2. It should be possible to complete the activities in an amount of time that is proportional to the instructional value of the activity. An
activity that takes students about an hour to complete yet covers only a tiny portion of the content area is not a well designed activity.

3 The number of activities to be marked by the course tutor needs to be determined by a careful consideration of educational and other pressures. A regular flow of written work between the tutor and the distant learner helps to foster a personal relationship and is very useful for feedback purposes. But it can also be costly and introduce delays that can be of educational significance, especially in courses where a learner can only successfully proceed to the next stage of learning after he has mastered the earlier stages.

4 Activities should require long written answers only when it is essential. Jenkins has pointed out that adult learners often have an understanding of a subject that is beyond their ability to express in writing, especially if they are using English as a second language (1976, 26).

5 The activities the course requires the students to do should be explained in the objectives at the outset of the course, so that the learners know in advance what kinds of activities they will be engaged in and can prepare themselves accordingly.

6 The activities must be expressed clearly and concisely, and contain all the information the learners need to have in order to complete them successfully. If the activity involves the carrying out of a practical exercise, the following points should be observed in order to ensure that the instructions are communicated without any ambiguity:

(a) The equipment and any special skills necessary for carrying out the practical exercise should be explained.

(b) The activity should be broken into small manageable steps and each step explained in simple terms.

(c) Difficult instructions should, where possible, be explained by illustrations.

(d) The course writer should review the instructions he has written to check that they are clear and meaningful to him.

Conclusion

If learning is to take place actively and efficiently through distance teaching materials, activities of the right type and amount for distance learners are essential. As stressed earlier, activities should not be created as a matter of routine after the content of the course has been written, but
planned carefully throughout the various developmental stages the course goes through. If activities are planned and constructed carefully and in the light of the suggestions made above, they will greatly help in promoting active learning, which is what all distance learning institutions, including Extension Services at USP, strive to provide.

References


Perraton, Hilary (1973) The Techniques of Writing Correspondence Courses. IEC Broadsheets on Distance Learning 2. Cambridge, Eng.: International Extension College.