



Anthropological Fieldwork in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) System

Rukshana Zaman

Faculty of Anthropology, School of Social Sciences, Indira Gandhi National Open University.

E-mail: rukshee@gmail.com

Abstract: In this article, using autoethnography as a method, I present a personal account of my lived experiences as an educator, teaching anthropology in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode. This autoethnography recounts the experience of the 'self' as to how the pedagogy of ODL was used in framing the course content of Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Anthropology Programme (BSCANH) in Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). The essence of this autoethnographic writing lies in recounting the challenges of incorporating Fieldwork, which is central to anthropology, and how this was made possible (actualised) in ODL mode. The article is a humble attempt to capture the nuances of ODL in the teaching-learning process.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Indira Gandhi National Open University, teaching anthropology in ODL, anthropological fieldwork in ODL

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Introduction

Using autoethnography as a method, in this article I explore my foray into the world of open and distance learning (ODL) and the challenges of teaching anthropology from a distance. I recount herein the personal experiences of developing a course on fieldwork in the ODL system and the challenges of a teacher who does not have face-to-face interactions with the learners. This autoethnographic account would lead the reader through the pedagogy of ODL as to how a connection is made with the learners using different modes of communication. The print material, satellite transmissions (Gyanvani-Interactive Radio Counselling sessions and Gyandarshan- teleconferencing), and the contact classes with academic counsellors who mentor the learners during fieldwork at the learner support centres are presented herein as a narrative.

Writing the Self: The Need for this Autoethnography

Autoethnography begins with a probing of the self (*auto*), rationalising the experiential insights to understand the cultural practices and experiences (*ethno*) that result in documenting the conduct of a process and systematically analysing the events (*graphy*). In the words of Ellis (2004), ‘autoethnography is a narrative of the self, which stems from memory, the emotions that a person experiences during an episode or incident’. Autoethnography is a well-established qualitative method, though in the past it has had to deal with its share of criticisms. It was labelled as ‘autobiography’ as the anthropological world believed in going to far off unknown places to explore and understand the ‘other’. During the formative years, studying the ‘other’ was the core of anthropology. Autoethnography, though it relies on memories, uses the personal journey of the self to relate it to the larger context of cultural experience, thus making it a method, and as a result, it is more than just an autobiography. The need for penning this autoethnography stems from personal experience of teaching anthropology at a distance. I joined the Discipline of Anthropology, housed in the School of Social Sciences at Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in the year 2010. Over the years, with my other colleagues, I have actively participated in developing courses for the Master of Arts Anthropology Programme. As a course coordinator for three courses- Social Anthropology, Comparative Ethnography and Tribes in India, my focus had been on using the ODL pedagogy for those courses. It was only when I proposed to launch the Bachelor of Science (Honours) Anthropology (BSCANH) as a Programme Coordinator that I came face-to-face with the challenges of developing a programme with the component of fieldwork included in it and also disseminating it. For an understanding of how open and distance learning works, in the next section, I am presenting its pedagogy.

Pedagogy of Open and Distance Learning

Following the norms of the open and distance learning (ODL) system, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), established by an Act of the Indian Parliament in 1985, has been engaged in providing education to a large segment of society who otherwise would have been excluded in the face-to-face learning system. During its establishment, IGNOU¹ was entrusted with “the dual objectives of offering need-based programmes at a distance, and coordinate and maintain standards of distance education systems in the country” (Panda, 2006:173).

Before we move on, herein, the understanding of open and distance learning is necessary. In 'Open Learning' by McKenzie, Postgate and Scupham, published by UNESCO in 1975, open learning has been described as: "Such systems are designed to offer opportunities for part-time study, for learning at a distance and for innovations in the curriculum. They are intended to allow access to a wider section of the adult population, to enable students to compensate for lost opportunities in the past or to acquire new skills and qualifications for the future. Open learning systems aim to redress social or educational inequalities and to offer opportunities not provided by conventional colleges or universities" (McKenzie *et al.*, 1975:11, cited from Reddy, 1988:12).

Open and distance learning is a system that is learner centric as opposed to the face-to-face system that is teacher centric. As in ODL, the development of programmes, courses and their dissemination is based on the needs of the learner, what is required by the learner and how the learner can optimally utilise the services provided by the institution. The strength of ODL is that it provides a. open access and b. flexibility to the teaching-learning process, in terms of how, where and when the learner wants to study. The conditions of open access and flexibility that enhances inclusiveness and equity are fulfilled for the learners by using the blended learning approach. This modular approach involves an integration of a. face-to-face contact classes as done by academic counselors at the Learner Support Centres and b. the use of technology enabled learner support (TELS) using digital platforms like FaceBook, Youtube, satellite transmissions like Gyan Vani, Gyan Darshan and Swayam Prabha, web portal eGyanKosh where the electronic format of the print material is made available by IGNOU. Thus, IGNOU is one of the forebearers in upholding inclusiveness and equity in the dissemination of the programmes and the support provided to the learners. With no cap on upper age limit for enrollment in programmes and courses IGNOU has allowed many to fulfill their long-term desire of higher education through accessible platforms. The multiple exit and entry and the academic bank of credits that are part of the programmes allows the learner the flexibility to learn at their own pace and space.

Thus, opportunities for learning are created, and knowledge is disseminated by diverse means, the first and foremost being the print material that also complies with the motto of IGNOU, 'providing education at the doorstep'. Once a learner registers for a programme, the relevant print material for the courses is dispatched to the residence of the learner. The division named the Material Printing and Production Division (MPDD) is exclusively dedicated to this task within IGNOU. The print material is also

made available via the web portal eGyanKosh ([eGyanKosh: Home](https://egyankosh.ac.in)). The portal can be accessed by the learners at any time and from anywhere, making learning inclusive.

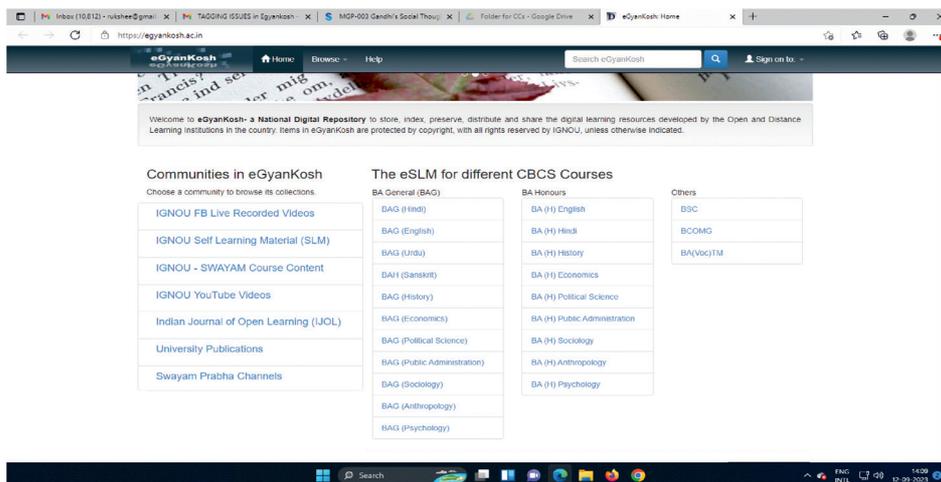


Image of eGyanKosh

Besides the print material and eGyanKosh, IGNOU uses information communication technology like Gyandarshan (Tele-conferencing), Gyanvani (Interactive Radio Counselling sessions) using satellite channels managed by the Electronic Media Production Centre (EMPC) of IGNOU. Centre for Online Education (COE) caters to the needs of the learners through the broadcast of SWAYAM PRABHA (Satellite channel), SWAYAM (An Indian government portal for free open online courses) and MOOCs (Massive Open Online Course). IGNOU also has its presence on social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube channel, etc.

As IGNOU strives to create an environment for inclusive education, to reach out to the unreached 69 Regional Centres (IGNOU Annual Report, 2023-24: ix) that have a pan India presence right from Jammu and Kashmir in the North to Kanyakumari in the South, to Manipur in the Northeast and Gujarat in the West engaging in face-to-face counselling sessions for the learners. The Regional Centres have created Learner Support Centres (LSC) that are housed in prestigious Universities, Colleges, Institutions, etc., that span across the length and breadth of the country. Counselling sessions are held in these LSCs on weekends to ensure maximum participation from the learners. Here in the LSCs, the learners meet their academic counsellors face-to-face. As our learners are from various walks of society and many are engaged in other professions, it becomes impossible for them to attend counselling sessions on a weekday. Thus,

IGNOU provides flexibility to its learners through counselling on weekends, and as there is no upper limit in terms of age, anyone who desires to acquire knowledge can find a place in one of our programmes.

Teaching Anthropology from a Distance

The genesis of anthropology as a scientific study lies in fieldwork. Anthropological fieldwork since its inception in the West had relied on visiting an 'exotic' place in the far-off East or Middle East, away from the 'civilisation' of the 'White man'. The everyday lived experiences of the people in those far-off places, which were different from those of the 'White man' studying them, made it "exotic". Reading from Malinowski's work, "*One has to cut oneself off ... leaving in as close contact with the 'natives' as possible, which really can only be achieved by camping right in their villages...*" (1922:6), we understand that fieldwork entails the study of the 'other' and was the prerogative of the 'White man' who was engaged in the study of humans- i.e. 'anthropology'. The essence of fieldwork during the early days, when anthropology was coming up as a subject, relied on a long, extended stay in the field, learning the local dialect and living amid the villagers, building a relationship of trust, becoming a member of the community, and thereby being a part of their lives. In a way, Malinowski's stay in the Trobriand Islands for almost thirty-one months set the tone for anthropological fieldwork.

Fieldwork is the key to anthropological studies where the student of undergraduate and post- graduate classes have to go for a two-week field study in a community, living with the people, learning their way of life, observing their everyday lives and communicating with the people by trying to learn the native language. However, with the rise of the digital and the virtual world in the twenty-first century, the very essence of the term 'field' has undergone a tremendous change. The field is no longer a 'far-off exotic' place, rather, it is any platform where human activities are seen. There has been a paradigm shift after the post-colonial era, when the study of the 'other' for which anthropology has been known since its inception has turned its gaze to studying the self, the digital and virtual space, among others. Thus, fieldwork in the anthropology curriculum in the conventional mode of teaching was incorporated for the students to experience the field. Rabinow (1997:3) had stated that the anthropology department during his days as a student was divided into two sets of people: those who had done their fieldwork and those who had not. The ones who had not visited the field were not considered as 'anthropologist' in the true sense of the term, as their initiation into fieldwork had not been done. It is considered a *rite de passage* (borrowing from Van

Genep). Thus, Fieldwork is that necessary component for being an anthropologist wherein the researcher “relies on an intensive study of the problem backed by a long-extended stay in the field area while gathering first-hand data using participant observation, interviews, collecting life histories and case studies, presently one of the most commonly used methods in social science research” (Zaman, 2024: 2-3).

Even during my days as an undergraduate and post-graduate student, going to the field was an initiation ceremony in itself. Before the students of the graduate or undergraduate batches were to embark on field work there were special sessions on how to conduct fieldwork. Our teachers shared their experiences from the fieldwork that they had done. Sessions on how to conduct oneself in the field and rapport-building were also considered necessary. The most important aspect of fieldwork was that it was always team ethnography, where all the graduates or undergraduates were taken to the same field, accompanied by one or two teachers. As the number of students was around 15-25 in each batch, we were asked to select a topic that we would study, an aspect of the community, such as social institutions, either marriage, family, kinship, etc. We would all go together to the field, collect our data during the day and in the evenings would share our field notes, debate and discuss on the various aspects that we had observed in the field. Thus, it was a learning process where knowledge and experiences were shared during the course of the fieldwork. This was one of the major challenges in the ODL system: how would our learners go to the field? As the learners are from different regional centres team ethnography as in going to the field as a team was ruled out. The implementation of conducting fieldwork as a team was not feasible as we had to provide our learners the flexibility to study at their own pace.

While designing the curriculum for the Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Anthropology (BSCANH) Programme, the challenge as a distant educator for me was to understand how to incorporate fieldwork in the ODL mode. How are the ODL learners in anthropology going to learn about fieldwork and conduct it on their own? Who would mentor them? The major challenge was how to motivate the learners to go to the field on their own, stay in the field and conduct data collection? Many learners take up ODL programmes as it allows them flexibility in terms of when they study, where they study and how they study. But going to the field would have to be planned and would hinder the learner’s day-to-day routine. Many of our learners are also enrolled in other programmes or working a nine-to-five job.

So, at times, I was tempted to borrow the method from Margaret Mead’s work, *The Study of Culture at a Distance* (1953), where anthropological fieldwork was done

from a distance. The book gives an insight of the United States on the eve of the Second World War, when it was still rising as a society and trying to combat with enemies about whom much was not known. When faced with enemies whose culture was not familiar to them, the U.S. government sought the help of anthropologists. Herein, one of the contributions of Margaret Mead and Rhoda Métraux is marked in this work as they studied the impact of culture in the characters of individuals who were at a distance and not accessible for direct observation through the available mediums of literature, film, etc. Some of the interesting aspects featured in the work were the original analysis of the Soviet style of chess, a study of Jean Cocteau's classic film *La Belle et la Bête*.

Introducing Fieldwork in the Curriculum

Though Mead's work was inspiring, I, as the Programme Coordinator, still wanted our anthropology learners to experience the field rather than rely only on secondary sources, to go through the *rite de passage* ceremony (fieldwork) to be a part of the anthropology fraternity. Levin and Wadmany (2006) had stated that distance education has the potential to provide students with a high-quality learning experience. Taking this forward in the absence of a teacher to teach learners face-to-face the nuances of fieldwork and how to conduct it, I delved into techniques available in open and distance learning to provide the learners with the fieldwork experience:

A. COURSE DESIGNING AND DEVELOPMENT

- (a) **Expert Committee Meeting-** The core of the ODL programme is curriculum design. It is a rigorous process where subject experts are invited for in-depth discussion on the courses. Hall (2011) had stated that in ODL courses, students' needs and perceptions are central in designing, developing and delivering (cross cited from Sachan, Sharma and Singh: 2014: 65). For the course on dissertation in Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Anthropology, wherein the component of field work was to be introduced, an Expert Committee Meeting was held in the discipline wherein anthropologists from various universities in India engaged in teaching were invited for brainstorming for designing, developing and delivering the course. The composition of the Expert Committee Meeting had been prepared in a way that there was representation from the North, South, East, North East and Western parts of India. This representation was crucial to understanding the different challenges that might have to be taken into account during the dissemination of the course. The pan-India representation helped in understanding the regional scenario that

our learners might face during the conduct of fieldwork, and thus, special attention was given to such areas in the course.

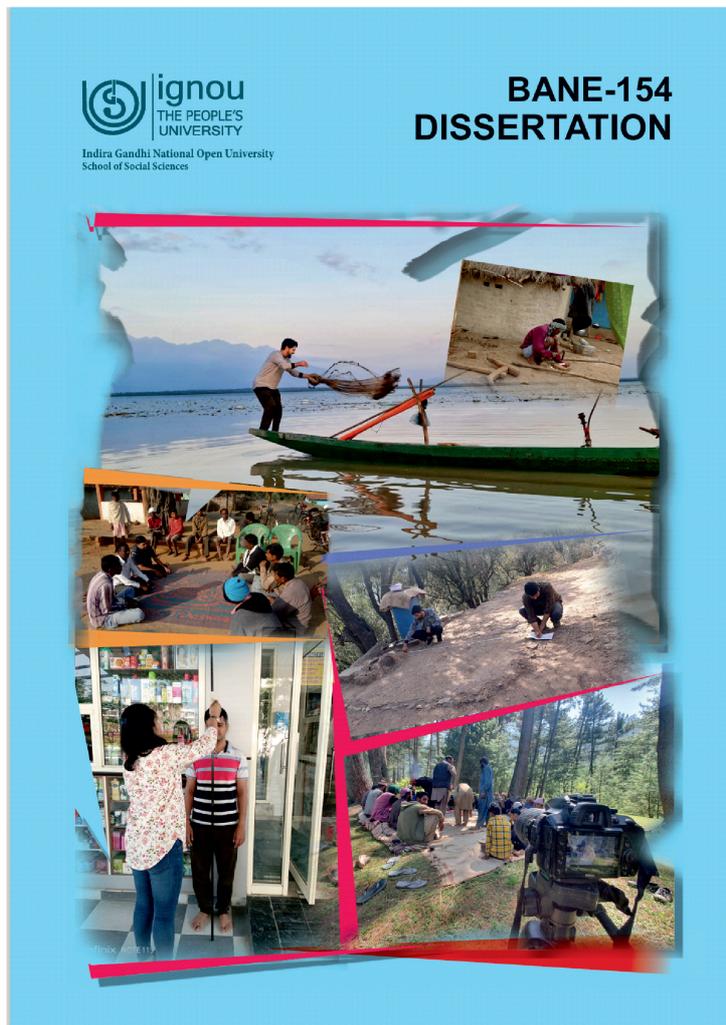
- (b) **Course Structure:** Presently, the course Dissertation BANE 154 is a six-credit discipline-specific optional course offered in the sixth semester of the Bachelor of Science (Honours) Anthropology Programme. The course was consciously made into an optional course, to uphold the flexibility that IGNOU provides to its learners. Had it been a compulsory course, it would have become difficult for many of the learners who are also professionals in their fields, as devoting themselves to 15-20 days of fieldwork would have been challenging.

The course has two components: a. Synopsis and b. Dissertation. A learner opting for this optional course has to prepare a synopsis with the help of the mentor and send it to the Programme Coordinator. The learner can select any topic of relevance and interest within the realm of physical/ biological or social and cultural anthropology. The synopsis approval is of much importance as the Programme Coordinator gets the opportunity to interact with the learner and look at the feasibility of the work proposed. We encourage the learners to write a synopsis that takes into account ethical considerations and also the accessibility of the field area and instruments (if needed). Normally, the learners are encouraged to assess the feasibility of topics that would require ethical clearance, like drawing blood or other samples from human beings, before committing to fieldwork. Once the synopsis is approved, the learner is guided by the mentor to conduct fieldwork during data collection, data compilation and analysis of the data up to writing the report in the form of a dissertation. The mentor's work ends with the submission of the dissertation. The evaluation process includes evaluation of the synopsis and the dissertation, followed by the viva-voce, which is conducted in the Regional Centre in face-to-face mode.

B. DISSEMINATION

- (a) **Print material-** The strength of ODL lies in the dual mode of dissemination of knowledge that is taken into consideration. Print material is the backbone of the system. A dissertation manual was thus, prepared, wherein every aspect of fieldwork was detailed- right from how to write a synopsis, selection of a topic, literature review, to the conduct of fieldwork, importance of rapport building in the field, tools and techniques to be used in the field leading to the writing of the dissertation. While preparing the print material, the cover

page was specially designed to resonate with the essence of going to the field and collecting data. I had reached out to our PhD scholars² to share their most captivating photos from the field- that either define the process of rapport building, participant observation in the field or the conduct of interviews, focus group discussion, etc. Thus, the result was a visual depiction of what happens in a field to inspire and motivate the learners to conduct fieldwork in the cover page of the print course material, 'Dissertation' course code BANE 154.



Cover Page of the Course BANE 154 concept and design by the author.

- (b) **Academic Counselling Sessions-** For the course BANE 154 ‘Dissertation’, counselling sessions were initiated in the Learner Support Centres registered for the programme BSCANH across the country. Wang et al. (2015), states learner support means “academic support focusing on helping learners to develop effective learning strategies, such as time management and collaborative skills, and technical support aiming to help students improve their knowledge of the technological tools and the fluency with which they use the tools to complete specific learning tasks” (p. 384 cited from Chapter 2: Theories Supporting Blended Learning – Guide to Blended Learning). In our learner support centres, the counsellors provide mentorship and encourage the learners during the counselling sessions. The mentors discuss with the learners and guide them in the process of selecting a topic of research and a field site. Emphasis is laid on the accessibility and the feasibility of conducting fieldwork for the selected topic and field site. The learners are also apprised of the methods of data collection in the field and how to conduct themselves in the field.
- (c) **Interactive Radio Counselling-** In each semester, I conduct a few interactive radio counselling sessions on ‘Writing a Synopsis’, ‘Fieldwork: Methods, Tools and Techniques’, etc., using the facilities provided by the Electronic Media Production Centre (EMPC) housed within IGNOU. EMPC, every month, shares the list of topics that would be covered. This list is shared with the Regional Centres so that they can disseminate the same in the Learner Support Centres to inform the learners. This ensures greater participation by learners in the IRCs. During the IRC, the learners have the phone facility to clear their doubts, if any. Thus, making it a two-way interactive session.
- (d) **Gyandarshan** is a half-hour teleconferencing session that I use every semester to present the nuances of fieldwork. Just like in the case of IRC, here too, the information is shared with the learners in the same manner, from EMPC. This is also an interactive session where the learners have access to the phone facility. During teleconferencing sessions, one of the benefits is that it allows visual presentation of objects and artefacts via PowerPoint presentations and videos that help in the cognitive learning process. The learner can actively engage with the presentations, and it allows the teacher space to explicitly go through the concepts with the learners.



The author presenting a Gyandarshan teleconferencing session on Writing a Synopsis, screenshot taken from the YouTube channel of IGNOU <https://www.youtube.com/live/xeEX3D5jxE0?si=MmF0F2qMCKqGLSaM>

(C) CHALLENGES DURING COVID-19

- (a) **Fieldwork during COVID-19:** As the lockdown came into force during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was a 'new normal' for us (Zaman, 2020). An experience of learning when we moved towards the digital platforms. We were yet to start the course on Dissertation for the BSCANH learners. However, as the Master's Programme also has components of projects and a dissertation in the final year, the queries kept pouring in 'Where is the field? Where to conduct fieldwork?' Many wanted to work on secondary sources. However, if that were implemented, the very purpose of our struggle to establish fieldwork in ODL would have been lost. Thus, we initiated Facebook Live sessions wherein, in one of the sessions, the discussion pertained to how Fieldwork could be conducted within the four walls of the house. Learners were encouraged to select topics on social institutions like family, marriage, kinship and understand the family dynamics, genealogy, etc of their own families. They were also initiated in digital ethnography- to use multi-media platforms, telephonic interviews, Zoom and Google meetings, to collect data. The use of Google Forms to create questionnaires to gather information was also taught to the learners. Thus, the spirit of fieldwork was kept alive among the learners during the COVID-19 lockdown.

We acquired and assimilated the system of Google Meet into our IGNOU communication system even after the COVID 19 restrictions were lifted. Presently, Regional Centres regularly arrange Google meetings with the learners, and we interact and guide them on their queries on how to write a synopsis and conduct fieldwork. This adaptation from the COVID times has brought the teacher and the learner closer; the direct contact that was missing is no longer a distant reality.

Summary

The course Dissertation BANE 154, which has the component of fieldwork, was launched as a discipline-specific optional course in the sixth semester under the programme Bachelor of Science (Honours) Anthropology. As the course includes compulsory fieldwork of 15-20 days, looking at our learner profile, most of whom prefer to learn at their own pace owing to other preoccupations, the expert committee members decided to make the course optional. This provided the learners the flexibility to either opt for or not to opt for the course as per their convenience. Thus, the design of the course BANE-154 upholds the learner-centric essence of ODL, followed by IGNOU. The delivery of the course using contact classes in the learner support centres, print course material and the technology enabled learning using digital platforms, web portals, Gyan Darshan and Gyan Vani has provided the learners with the flexibility to reach out to the course coordinator and study at their own pace. Teleconferencing has been one of the most viable means of reaching out to the millions of learners scattered across the length and breadth of the country enrolled in the numerous programmes offered by IGNOU (Khan & Panda, 2006: 206). The success of teleconferencing lies in the fact that it is a two-way process; a learner is able to meet the teacher on-screen, which helps in creating a rapport, building a connection that contributes largely to the learning experience.

The mentors in the learner support centres provide the much-needed guidance to the learners while they prepare their synopses and plan their fieldwork. As fieldwork is the essence of this course, all possible measures have been taken to encourage the learner to conduct the field study on their own. Till January 2024, the enrollment in the programme BSCANH was approximately 2023 (data as posted on the School of Social Sciences notice board), which emphasises the popularity of the programme among the learners, despite the challenge of fieldwork. As many of the learners have opted for the Dissertation Course BANE 154 in the sixth semester, it emphasises the relevance of fieldwork that is central to the understanding of anthropology as a 'field science'. As an

auto-ethnographic account I tried to bring in the lived experience both as a Programme Coordinator and a Course Coordinator the challenges and the considerations that are taken into account while developing a course based on fieldwork. The ODL pedagogy though believed to help learners study at a distance proved to be insightful as it allowed both flexibility and accessibility to the learner. The learner centric approach, which involves guidance and handholding at every stage made it possible for the learners to experience the field within the realms of Open and Distance Learning.

Notes

1. IGNOU is continuously striving to build a knowledge society through inclusive education. The mandate of the University is to:
 - Provide access to higher education to all segments of society.
 - Offer high-quality, innovative and need-based programmes at different levels to all those who require them.
 - Reach out to the disadvantaged by offering programmes in all parts of the country at affordable costs.
 - Promote, coordinate and regulate the standards of education offered through open and distance learning in the country.
 - To achieve the twin objectives of widening access for all sections of society and providing continual professional development and training to all sectors of the economy, the University uses a variety of media and the latest technology in imparting education (IGNOU)
2. Photographs contributed by the research scholars from the Anthropology discipline from their own fieldwork for the design of BANE 154 Dissertation cover page. They have all been awarded their PhD degrees.
 1. Dr. Gaurav Saxena is seen conducting a focus group discussion (FGD)
 2. Dr. Naga Raju Chikkala shared pictures he clicked during the rapport-building process
 3. Dr. Ubaid Ahmad Dar shared pictures of tools used in fieldwork: Camera and measuring tapes
 4. Dr. Hashmat Habib is seen engrossed in participant observation learning to cast the net.
 5. Dr. Monika Shah in the picture is using the anthropometer to take measurements of the participants during her fieldwork.

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