

Self-Talk: Musing on Distance Education. (2023). By Sanjaya Mishra. Zenodo.
226 Pages. ISBN: 9798393498689.

Reviewed by Sayantan Mandal, Indian Institute of Technology Jammu
Sheriya Sareen, Indian Institute of Technology Jammu

“The experience trap limits organisational thinking at times of uncertainty.” (p. 150)

Self-Talk: Musings on Distance Education is a compilation of blogs and a series of reflective writings written by the author on open and distance learning (ODL) and online learning, accounting for over three decades of his experience. The cornucopia of his ideas and anecdotes pertains to the key innovations that hallmarked developments in ODL and online learning. The book shares much-needed pathways to re-imagine compromised education in the post-pandemic world. At the time of writing this book, Dr. Sanjaya Mishra worked as the director of education at the Commonwealth of Learning (CoL) in British Columbia, Canada. The book is primarily based on his prior trove of experiences as a distance educator at the sole centrally-funded open university in India, the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). The goal of this book is to understand the developments in distance education, including the changing roles of teachers and students, with critical discourse centred around IGNOU, based on lessons learned globally and specifically from engagements at the CoL. The book comprises six sections, encompassing 45 chapters.

The author modestly titles the book “Self-Talk”. However, this book offers insight into the author’s reflective journey to make sense of changes in ODL and online learning. It is in this context that we view the book’s title. The intended audience is mostly distance education teachers, but there are examples, critical discourses, and suggestions that may act as a reference tool for policymakers and as a primer for researchers. In particular, some chapters related to curriculum development and online learning are not specific to ODL and may benefit curriculum developers and teachers in traditional institutions who wish to embrace online learning.

The book excavates how ODL remained a second chance until the pandemic. It underscores the changes in ODL and online learning catalysed by technological interventions and illuminates the need to innovate and learn, despite the redux in the post-pandemic period. Although it is a blog-based book, each chapter is stand-alone, and different chapters in any given section may be interesting to a wider audience. For instance, though the first section is a primer to understanding distance education, it also introduces a suggestive curriculum that may be of

specific interest to distance education teachers. The organisation of chapters depicts some degrees of overlapping, which is justified by the context of the conglomeration of blogs and other associated literature written by the author. The chapters need to be read in a specific context and time to appreciate the discourse.

The book is thoughtful, not restricting itself to understanding the developments of distance education, but brings to the table critical discourse on a wide range of allied concepts rooted in personal experiences, thereby giving a nuanced bottom-up understanding of the realities. It also provides a hint of flavour to various aspects through the author's fleeting and divergent thoughts. It is reflected in the author's discussion pertaining to the genesis of distance education through Keegan's (1988) and Taylor's (2001) work, wherein he refers to the United Nations (2023) Sustainable Development Goal 4 – quality education – then turns to the massive open online courses (MOOCs), and the subsequent thought relates to the need for a qualification framework. The contemplation extends along three dimensions: (i) the changing geography, from the global level to the Commonwealth countries and further to the Indian context through the case of IGNOU; (ii) the switching education levels, from school to higher to vocational education in the distance and online modes; and (iii) the transposing time, from pandemic-focused to pre- and post-pandemic times.

The first section revisits the history of distance education, discussing the roles of distance education teachers. In the next section, we note the book transposing from ODL to blended learning, encompassing a generic regulatory framework for blended learning. The third section focuses on open education, built on the virtues of “fairness, flexibility, and freedom” (p. 47), and also discusses problems with credentialing MOOC courses and the open educational resources (OER) movement. The subsequent section talks about pedagogical affordances through technological interventions, including video-based learning using blogs, radio, SMS in teleconferencing sessions, and EDUSAT (educational satellites). It also proposes an interaction, motivation, pedagogy, access, cost, and training (IMPACT) framework to guide decisions on the deployment of technologies. The fifth section revolves around different aspects of IGNOU, from community colleges to dual modes, and from issues related to equivalence to problems in conducting assessments. It talks about chaos in online learning and the dismantling of student support services. The sixth section questions the resistance to “change” in the education sector and finally emphasises the need for strategic foresight in planning.

The primary strength of the book is its deeper reflection, as evident through the author's remark that “most of the time, decisions are taken that are not in tune with distance education practices worldwide [...]” (p. 9). The book encompasses visionary ideas like proposing blended learning as a policy, which is not in place till date in the Indian context. It also takes a step forward by raising pertinent questions about the philosophy of distance education in general and IGNOU in particular. The author eloquently questions, “[...] are we unconsciously moving towards making distance education synchronous? Are we predominantly thinking that distance education should have synchronous interactions?” (p. 91). Taking a critical stance on certain

initiatives by the IGNOU, the author raises the following thought-provoking question, “how does IGNOU plan to reach the unreached through face-to-face programmes?” (p. 101). Thus, the book raises very pertinent and timely questions, calling for serious redressal.

Despite the book's critical outlook, it sometimes takes a linear approach while developing a few arguments. For instance, the author's definition of blended learning as “the thoughtful use of face-to-face and online learning.” (p. 5) is more technology-centric and less focused on pedagogy. This can be supported by further argument when the author proposes that 30% - 79% of content can be delivered online through blended learning. Bearing in mind that the suggestions arising in the book are based on the author's long experiences of working in the sector, and therefore are very valuable.

Overall, “Self-Talk: Musings on Distance Education” provides an excellent overview and some pertinent questions on various aspects related to open and distance learning and online learning. It does not claim to introduce ground-breaking concepts but rather offers an enjoyable, reflective, and thought-stimulating reading experience that can attract a diverse audience, including those engaged in distance education, studying it, or simply seeking a better understanding.

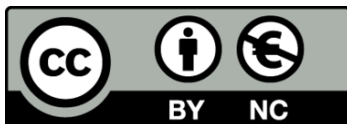
References

- Keegan, D. J. (1988). *On defining distance education*. In D. Sewart, D. Keegan, & B. Holmberg (Ed.), *Distance Education*. Routledge.
- Mishra, S. (2023). *Self-talk: Musing on Distance Education*. Zenodo.
<https://zenodo.org/doi/10.5281/zenodo.7951701>
- Stracke, C. M., Downes, S., Conole, G., Burgos, D., & Nascimbeni, F. (2019). Are MOOCs Open Educational Resources? A Literature Review on History, Definitions and Typologies of OER and MOOCs. *Open Praxis*, 11(4), 331-341.
- Taylor, J. C. (2001). Fifth generation distance education. *Instructional Science and Technology*, 4(1), 1-14. <https://research.usq.edu.au/item/9x75x/fifth-generation-distance-education>
- United Nations. (2023). *The Sustainable Development Goals*. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

Authors

Sayantan Mandal is a senior Assistant Professor at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Jammu, India. Previously, he worked at NIEPA and the University of Delhi. He graduated from the Aarhus University, Denmark; receiving his PhD from the University of Deusto, Spain and internship from UNESCO, Hamburg, Germany. At NIEPA, Dr. Mandal coordinated a large-scale study on Teaching and Learning in Indian Higher Education and co-authored the Indian Higher Education Report 2017 on Teaching, Learning, and Quality. At IIT Jammu, Dr. Mandal is presently coordinating two research projects on Integrating-Teaching-Learning Digital Education and Examining Teachers' Competencies in Generative AI-Enabled Higher Education. Dr. Mandal was also a part of the Pan IIT research group investigating the impacts of the pandemic on teaching and learning in IITs across India. Recently, he was awarded a Fellowship by IIT Jammu to continue his research at the University of British Columbia, Canada. *Email: sayantan.mandal@iitjammu.ac.in*

Sheriya Sareen is a Doctoral fellow (UGC-SRF) at IIT Jammu, India. She is currently offering research consultancy to COL-CEMCA concerning blended learning and policies. She is also a research team member in two ongoing research projects with Dr. Sayantan Mandal, first on the integration of higher education with technology integration and second on teachers' competencies and Generative AI. Previously, she was a visiting scholar at NUS, Singapore, COL-CEMCA, and IIT Delhi. Her research spans higher education policies, blended learning, sustainability in higher education, and the professional development of teachers in blended and online learning environments. Sheriya holds dual master's degrees in Physics and Education and has received numerous accolades, including a gold medal and position, during her academic journey. *Email: 2020rhu1027@iitjammu.ac.in*



© 2024 Sayantan Mandal, Sheriya Sareen

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial CC-BY-NC 4.0 International license.