

From Open Courseware to Open Classware

MIT gave a fillip to the Open Course Ware (OCW) movement in 2001, when they placed nearly all their undergraduate and graduate courses, including many audio-video lectures, free online.

'Unlocking Knowledge, Empowering Minds', the legend on MIT's homepage underscores the objective of the movement. Today MIT's OCW includes over 2,000 courses, accessed by over 35 million users worldwide; 60% from outside the USA. A number of leading universities in every continent has launched similar projects to leverage the availability of the worldwide web.

In India, the OCW movement has been tentative, embodied in the government-sponsored National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL), to improve the quality of engineering education.

It is anchored by seven IITs and the IISc, Bangalore. Another variant of OCW in India has been the Flexilearn portal of the Indira Gandhi National Open University, which not only offers a lot of free course material, but also enables online enrolment of students. Both are largely limited to the use of technology in delivering education, rather than unlocking knowledge and empowering minds.

While OCW has found enthusiastic takers across the world, including China, our management schools in general and IIMs in particular have been lethargic in seizing the initiative. The only exception was IIM Bangalore which had at least a portal called OCW@IIMB. While the portal seems no longer operational, when last operational, it had some ten odd courses across, with many without any published courses. It currently has a portal for 'open education consortium'.

The overall situation in this direction is sad. We have nearly 4,000 private business schools, most of which lack quality faculty, infrastructure and curricula. Qualified faculty with PhDs in management are few. Even IIMs have been unable to attract good faculty in required numbers. Each of the IIMs awards doctorates in single digits annually.

So how can a limited faculty resource train tens – if not hundreds – of thousands of managers for our large infrastructure projects, industry, banks, auto-majors, airlines, defence, and our large manufacturing sector? We need even more managers to deliver quality education, health, skilling, and a thousand other social services to our population of 1.3 billion.

And then there are the tens of thousands of SMEs, NGOs, micro-finance and other micro enterprises, crying out for managers in millions, of some minimal quality. With 90% of our labour force being in the unorganised sector, we need even more managers to steer this manpower towards organised industries.

And yet, Indian institutions have done little to take the pole position in addressing this need. Even though most IIMs have increased their intake in response to government prodding to do so in recent years, they can do much more to leverage their expensive infrastructure more effectively for the benefit of the country. Can the IIMs rise to the occasion? Can they learn from the prizewinning corn farmer whose secret of success was to share his seeds with the neighbours, because then, when the wind blew, their seeds blew his way enriching his corn? After all, IIM, Ahmedabad's logo carries the tag-line '*Vidhya Viniyogadwikasaha*', meaning, the more you spread knowledge, the more it spreads.

And yet, ironically, members of IIM Ahmedabad's board were shy to even consider the idea of taking their classes online for fear of brand-dilution! But if a tag-line like, '*Vidhya Viniyogadwikasaha*' is to have any real meaning, we need a revolution in the field of open class-ware. The truth is our institutions can do a lot more in this direction, if they want to. They must know that their competitiveness does not stem from their course content. Their true assets are the quality of their faculty, students, systems, processes and infrastructure and what they can do with these. Ideally by now, IIMs should have been in the thick of the OCW movement.

But it may not be too late. They could do for Class-ware what MIT did for Course-ware. They could take the classrooms (ClassWare) of the top IIMs, rather than just the course contents (Courseware), online to millions of students out there. IIMs have better quality faculty than most. What if each and every course taught at an IIM, by the best of its teachers in every course, were beamed online to hundreds of thousands of students in thousands of private b-schools across the country or in Reliance Web-World-like outlets?

These outlets could be manned by coordinators trained at IIMs to help coordinate assignments, clarify doubts, set and evaluate examinations and quizzes, and highlight learning points. Online classes could deliver superior understanding of management principles to online students than what sub-standard faculty can do face to face.

The private schools could decide which of the Class-ware classes to subscribe to; other private students may opt for classes only in say, finance or marketing leading to certificate courses in those disciplines; they could pace their learning in an open university framework, say an IIM Online diploma. Thus, IIMs could penetrate every corner of India. The incremental cost of such ClassWare open to tens or hundreds of thousands of students would be negligible, compared to full-time education.

Would such Open ClassWare dilute the IIM brand? Hardly. Everyone would know the difference between an IIM Online diploma and an IIM full-time diploma. MIT's brand is not diluted by OCW. It added to MIT's sheen across the world. Given India's skills in IT and our need to ramp up the quality of our managers, Open ClassWare may be an idea which is overdue. If we don't do it, we may be passing on the initiative to an MIT or a Harvard. Actually, we may already be losing the race in this direction.