The Obstruction of OER Development, Adaptation, and Utilization of the National Open School of Trinidad and Tobago 2010-2013

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INTRODUCTION

At present the National Open School of Trinidad and Tobago (NOSTT) operates 46 centres in several parts of Trinidad and Tobago. From its inception in 2007, the author has been a part of NOSTT in two different areas – first as a Mentor/Tutor of mathematics and more recently as a Learner Support Officer for central schools in Trinidad. Every August NOSTT begins a new cycle of registration for new and continuing learners in all its centres and recruits new teaching staff in the form of Mentor/tutor. The training of teachers in the dynamics and tenants of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) begins and they are subsequently called facilitators. However, from 2010 NOSTT has seen many changes made to its management team and no place in the Ministry of Education (MOE) policies on continuing with its vision, mission and philosophies. In fact NOSTT has been placed under the duties and responsibilities of the Curriculum Department of the MOE. It is unclear whether the Curriculum Department, with its other duties and responsibilities, can continue, maintain, expand and implement the various policies and initiatives of NOSTT. This paper will put into perspective and demonstrate the massive amount of work done by NOSTT since 2007; the learners they have assisted; and the many best practices that this department was able to achieve.

Historical Perspective

NOSTT began its operation in 2007 with assistance from the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and its many partners. Persons from the Namibia Open School gave workshops to share their experiences in ODL implementation and give guidance and best practices based on their experiences. Following these and other consultation sessions, the first NOSTT classes of Mathematics and English Language were offered to learners in preparation to write the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC). The secondary school used was Waterloo Secondary School and to date it has been a flagship of NOSTT and a beacon in implementing ODL classes. The CEO of Commonwealth of Learning (COL) at the time, Sir John Daniels, also met these learners and encouraged them. This was an historic occasion and saw the beginning of NOSTT at its first centre.

The unique aspect of these first classes was that the facilitator and the learners decided when the classes will meet and the duration of the sessions. The classes were held at times on weekends to facilitate learners who had severe difficulties to attend the face-to-face sessions. NOSTT created this facility to support learners. Facilitators were available to speak to their learners via telephone, if help was needed to complete assignment, to clarify concepts and answer other pertinent questions. The times in which learners' can call their facilitators by telephone were disused and agreed upon by the learners and facilitator. This and other matters which will affect learners were solved by consensus. Thus, the NOSTT model of staying connected and having learner interaction in making policies, emphasized having learners take responsibility for their own learning.

Textbooks were given to learners and Lesson Summaries were developed by facilitators to begin to create NOSTT print-base learning material. Learners were given a package when they registered which include text-book for mathematics and English Language and Lesson Summaries. Meetings were held before classes begin with learners in order to explain Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and the type of learning environment NOSTT visualizes and envision.

From the commencement of NOSTT as a department of the MOE, the Director and her team of educators, advisors and technical personnel, developed an educational system which uses a blend of

conventional and distance education methods which allows learners to choose how to learn, when to learn, where to learn and what to learn using a wide range of educational media. They knew that the new system had to be complementary to the formal education system. Not only were the learners different but their needs, maturity and status in life fundamentally diverse.

Most of the learners who are attracted to the NOSTT programme have not been successful for many reasons. Some of them are working whilst others are trying to recover from their academic failures; others cease the opportunity to improve their grades or equip themselves with academic subjects to gain a promotion and to get ahead in life; still others were in trade schools and needed to pass certain CSEC subjects. There are also some learners who have not been to a school or learning environment for over ten and twenty years. In fact there have been cases where men and women over sixty years old have committed to the NOSTT programme and have been successful at Mathematics and English Language. There have also been a great many success stories in the young history of NOSTT as it plays a vital role in providing people of all ages with learning opportunities that are varied, flexible, accessible, inclusive, learner-focused and responsive. It facilitates those who may have missed out at an earlier stage or those who may simply wish to further their career goals or personal development by offering more diversified curricula.

Initially, NOSTT attracted and targeted learners who just wrote the CSEC examination. One of the responsibilities of the Centre Coordinator of NOSTT was to advertise in and around their centres for learners in the surrounding communities. The application forms were published also on the local newspaper. In order to support the centres, the administrators had meetings arranged before the beginning of classes every year targeted at the new learners. It is at these meetings that classes were arranged for the most parts. Classes had to be twenty (20) students minimum for it to be convened. It must be noted that NOSTT catered for religious bodies and working class and operates on seven day week cycle.

NOSTT classes exploited the teaching and instructional strategies of the open learning system and are subjectively influenced by the use of information and communication technologies (ICT's). The unique characteristics of open school learners around the world also holds for NOSTT: wide variation in age, experience, learning skills, reading skills and life skills; Independent, self-propelled and self-motivated learners; less time available for study than a full-time student. Thus, the system of NOSTT had to cater for all these variables and fortunately at its inauguration this was known and the necessary preparatory work done. In addition, NOSTT classes have no age limit, the tuition is free, there are free access to study material and tutorial support and classes are flexible to cater to the needs of the out of school population, repeaters and working adults

Open learning depends largely on self-study materials, usually prepared in modular formats so that flexibility can be maintained and NOSTT with limited resources began creating Lesson Summaries and other print-base materials at its inception by training its founding facilitators. Capacity building was also sort after by having personnel given scholarship in instructional design from COL. This was an important step as the Director of NOSTT endevoured to have the staff to perform their duties with the needed skills and competencies. The basic feature of self-study material is its carefully structured presentation designed to make learning easy and effective. NOSTT created Information in small segments for presentation to learners and facilitators with intermediate checks to monitor ODL instruction and learning.

The use of electronic media is an integral component of open school instruction. The technology intervention strategies include one way communication technologies such as radio, television, print (study guides and newspaper); which will be supplemented by the more effective interactive technologies like audio- and video- conferencing, teleconferencing, interactive television, computer-managed learning, and intelligent tutoring systems over time. After creating print base materials, NOSTT decided to use internet technology as was demonstrated by the use of facilitation using Facebook by one of its facilitators (Warner, 2010).

After using Mathematics and English Language as the pilot subjects, NOSTT included other CSEC courses, such as Spanish, History, Principles of Account (POB), Principles of Business (POB), Social Studies, Biology, Physics and Integrated Science. There were computer courses, such as the International Computer Driving Licence (ICDL) that were added to the programme and assistance was given to other ministries and other department within the MOE.

NOSTT at Present

According to the Ministry of Education's (MOE) website of Trinidad and Tobago, NOSTT represents an educational system which uses a blend of conventional and distance education methods and allows learners to be a part of the decision making process with their facilitator. It continues to say that it is complementary to the formal education system and play a vital role in providing people of all ages with learning opportunities that are diverse, flexible, accessible, inclusive, learner-focused and responsive. It facilitates those who may have missed out at an earlier stage or those who may simply wish to further their career goals or personal development by offering more diversified curricula.

In March 2008, at a Regional Meeting of Focal Point in Jamaica, the Director of NOSTT outlined accomplishments and plans of NOSTT till 2012. For example, the following were included as new perspectives: to pursue collaborative activities that can build on synergies between the Preuniversity Programme (PUP) of the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT) and NOSTT; continue capacity building activities in the following areas: Course Writing; Computer Literacy Training; Continue the writing of self-study modules in 8 academic and 3 technical vocational areas (print format).

NOSTT Achievements

The achievements of NOSTT are many and have touched and continue to transform the lives of many citizens of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Over 10,000 learners have been a part of NOSTT since its inception in 2007. The results from the various examinations have been positive and there were some over forty year old learners who did particularly well in their examinations. There was an achievement day function for the learners of NOSTT in 2009 which highlighted the many successes of learners since its inception and it was a memorable day for all.

COL has assisted NOSTT with many events and initiatives. The following are the provisions of expertise which COL was able to accomplish for NOSTT advancement (Sampson-Ovid & Rosemin, 2008):

- 1 workshop on Instructional Design for ODL 2 workshops on Self-learning materials development
- 1 workshop on management of Open Schooling.
- 31 course writers trained; In-house style guide developed; Topic mapping and lesson development commenced;
- 8 NOSTT centres established; Learner support services include face-to-face tutoring in centres, the provision of Lesson summaries, Electronic support materials and exam solutions for CXC CSEC Math & English;
- Study skills and examination tips workshops Pursue collaborative activities that can build on synergies between the Preuniversity Programme (PUP) of UTT and NOSTT. Continue capacity building activities in the following areas: Course Writing: Computer Literacy Training;
- Continue the writing of self-study modules in 8 academic and 3 tech voc areas (print format). Introduce other subject areas based on demand. Learner Support: Expand the number of centres;
- Train more tutors; Offer online support to tutors and students. Management of Open Schools: Establish a NOSTT Advisory Board;
- Develop NOSTT Policy;
- Governance training for NOSTT advisory board;
- Include UTT's PUP personnel in all training activities for NOSTT. Leveraging technologies to increase access to learning content, provide professional development training for teachers and tutors, learner support services, administration and management and allow for collaboration.

NOSTT has been able to have three streams of learners to cater for its diverse clientele. There are a group of learners who will take 4-6 months to be ready to write successfully their CSEC examinations. Then there are those who will need about 9 months and finally, the group who has not been in school for sometime will take maybe a couple of years. However, everything is based on the responsibility that the learner wants to take toward their studies. This is indeed a unique and novel way of streaming these learners and it has worked well.

Another facet of NOSTT which was successfully introduced to ensure that facilitators, and centre personnel were given the support to perform their duties successfully, was the introduction of Learner Support Officers. One of their duties were to visit weekly various centres and report to the head office of NOSTT what is happening and what are some of the improvements articulated by the learners and centre personnel. With 46 centres located throughout Trinidad and Tobago, and in some instances in suburban areas, it was difficult with the limited staff at the head office to monitor and support. Again this initiative worked well and was constantly improved upon as reports and suggestions were made.

Clearly, NOSTT has visibly made and continues to make a valuable contribution to the growth and development to the human capital of citizens of Trinidad and Tobago who needed a new start. The teaching modalities and approaches used by NOSTT and the interaction of learners deciding when and for how long classes should be was indeed new and innovative to the shores of learning in the twin island state. It was also magnificent to see men and women in their forties and members of the protective services, like the Police and Fire Officers, be a part of the programme to improve themselves. Some women even said that they were doing the courses to assist their children when they entered secondary school. Thus the achievement of NOSTT has been positive to a vast majority of the citizenry of Trinidad and Tobago.

The Way Forward

From 2010 NOSTT has experienced a decline in its operation due to new policies of the MOE. The amount of work that has preceded 2010 can be seen in its offices and the respect it has gained from COL and their participation on joining with other Open Schools in the commonwealth to produce open content for subjects that are similar, such as Mathematics, Principles of Business and Principles of Accounts. The new administrative home of NOSTT, the Curriculum Department, has inherited a great deal of knowledge and resources which can be used to improve and take NOSTT forward. In other words, the Online Educational Resources (OER) development, adaptation and utilization of NOSTT, now rests in the hands of curriculum officers who should relish and improve upon the work already done and achieved.

The past two decades has seen a revolution in how students learn and how educational institutions and departments have been adopting and grappling with complex forms of interactive electronic communication networks to support online learning. The knowledge explosion, as purported on the internet supported by educational on-line software databases and the socio economic trends of knowledge based global and service economy has created a crisis and demand for more effective, flexible, interactive, customized and just-in-time instructional systems. Beyond a doubt this has transformed the area of teaching on the internet. Whatever its form, synchronous or asynchronous, one-to-one or many-to-many, teachers/facilitators must be trained to deliver to 21st century learners not just content but crucial skills. These skills include personal and social responsibility, planning, critical thinking, reasoning, creativity, strong communication skills, cross-cultural understanding, visualizing and decision-making and knowing how and when to use technology. It is to this that NOSTT must look toward for improvement. It will not be enough to relegate NOSTT to a traditional evening school programme.

In 1995, the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment, in the United States of America, produced a landmark report - “Teachers and Technology: Making the Connection" - which revealed that most teachers did not feel prepared to use technology effectively. A noteworthy finding of the report discovered that 30% of the technology budget should be used for teacher training. The focal point up to that time had been mostly on purchasing hardware and software. This report truly brought to the attention of educational administrators everywhere the importance of effective professional development for administrators and teachers.

The Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) concluded that well-informed administrators who are comfortable and competent using technology have been key players in leading and supporting technology in schools (OTA, 1989, 1995). A surmountable amount of evidence exists suggesting that technology programs in schools operate at a minimal level. Studies also show that school administrators training and knowledge base have not kept pace with the rapid revolutionary changes in both education and technology (Creighton, 2002), causing a lack of enthusiastic support for the integration and implementation of technology beyond the essential level. NOSTT is in need of placing more emphasis on the online aspect of ODL for both learners and facilitators and create an environment where all learners can participate. Mobile learning may be an option to investigate as most nationals of Trinidad and Tobago has at least one cellular phone.

In 2002 a study conducted on technology coordinators from more than 800 school districts across the United States of America told interviewers that many teachers are still unprepared on how to integrate technology into classroom instruction (McCaffrey, 2002). The study, entitled "Are We There Yet? Research and Guidelines on Schools' Use of the Internet," concluded that while many school districts have made great strides in joining the digital age by installing computers. However, schools need to bridge great barriers before realizing a return on their investments in technology. The biggest barrier is getting teachers to infuse technology in classroom instruction as a resource as a means of improving student learning and achievement.

It is therefore appropriate to deduce from the above that educational technology requires and endorses that online practitioners, as NOSTT facilitators, have the skills to integrate technology into the curriculum, align it with student learning goals, and use it for engaged learning projects. The quality of teaching is the factor that matters most and thus professional development for teachers become the key issue in using technology to improve the quality of learning in the classroom. NOSTT as a unit need to develop its facilitators via professional development online sessions to deal with infusing technology as a resource in teaching and learning.

Conclusion

NOSTT, as part of the MOE, has its part to play in firstly getting its mentor/tutors/facilitators and then their learners ready and equip with the 21st century skills and competencies in order that they be fitted for the knowledge-based workplace that awaits them. The same teachers who teach in secondary schools are used by NOSTT as mentors/tutors after school. There is a need to further develop the human capital which NOSTT uses. Thus, the need for continuous professional development is critical. It is hoped that the new thrust of the MOE will include NOSTT as it has its place in the landscape of the education system of The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago – this has been demonstrated by the achievements since 2007.

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