

ODL and In-Service Teacher Education: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

In 2002 the Ministry of Education and Culture (Jamaica) entered into a partnership with the University of the West Indies on a project to upgrade the teachers in the newly upgraded high schools. The objective was to take participants from the Diploma in Education (Trained Teachers) to a Bachelor of Education through a programme composed of ten courses in a content area and ten education courses. The programme offers opportunities to explore the blended approach as a part of the process of transformation of education and to assess the extent to which such an approach can truly help in the development of and delivery of education opportunities.

This paper examines the delivery of the History content component of the University of the West Indies/Ministry of Education Bachelor of Education Secondary Distance Programme. It discusses the many opportunities for developing expertise in course development and writing, subject coordinating and in course delivery. It instances the challenges in administration, programme structure within an educational institution that is essentially arranged for face-to-face delivery. It suggests the issues to be addressed in moving a distance education experiment within a traditional institution to an established open education component of the institution's core programmes.

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INTRODUCTION

The government of Jamaica has been faced with the challenge to provide quality teachers for its primary and secondary institutions. In 2002 a number of secondary schools were upgraded to high schools. Most teachers in these schools were holders of a diploma in education. The Ministry of Education and Culture entered into a partnership with the University of the West Indies to upgrade the teachers in these newly upgraded schools. The objective was to take participants from the Diploma in Education to a Bachelor of Education. The programme offers opportunities to explore the blended approach as a vehicle for transformation of education and to assess how such an approach can help in the development and delivery of education opportunities.

This paper examines the delivery of the History content component of the University of the West Indies/Ministry of Education Bachelor of Education Secondary (Distance) Project and discusses the opportunities for developing expertise in course development, writing, subject coordinating and course delivery. It posits that while there are challenges in grafting a distance education programme onto a face-to-face programme structure, the blended approach provides a useful strategy for transition into a dual mode institution.

THE PROGRAMME

The Bachelor of Education Secondary (Distance) Programme was designed to offer a degree to teachers on the job in four years. The History Education option drew on courses already in the curriculum of the Department of History and Archaeology. While the delivery of the programme demanded flexibility not offered in the face-to-face programme, the students were unable to choose the course they wished to pursue. This was markedly different from the face-to-face programme.

The selection of courses was informed by the department's view of what a History graduate should have done as core courses and well as what teachers would need to know to teach the national curriculum and satisfy the Caribbean Secondary Education Curriculum and Caribbean Advance Proficiency Examination. Thus the programme was directed at meeting the purpose for which it was designed. This limitation of choice was also cost effective as the number of students participating in the programme would not merit an open list of courses and suggests how distance programmes can be group/client specific.

The method of delivery, the project orientation of the programme and the limited time between development and implementation informed the choice of courses and also suggested the use of a blended approach. The time constraint limited the number of courses that could be written in a short time. The speed with which the History Education programme could be crafted rests partially on the fact that the established course offerings of the Department of History and Archaeology reflected the needs of the Caribbean community, especially in terms of what history syllabi require at the lower levels of the education system. This meant that no new courses had to be developed, only written for distance teaching. This is one of the strengths in the university's thrust towards a dual mode institution; the group specific relevance of existing courses which can facilitate the development of open and distance learning programmes once there is a team of writers willing to undertake the task of conversion.

Flexibility of the Programme

The flexibility in the delivery of course suggests a possible way forward as the university becomes a dual mode institution. As a project of limited duration, every effort was made to ensure that the participants completed the programme in the designated time. So adjustments were made to the original schedule to not only reduce the time for doing the degree from four to three years, but to

help the cohort of students affected by the reduction as well as to help those who for whatever reasons were falling behind to complete in the shortest possible time. The flexibility was possible because courses were prescribed and there was a pool of faculty who could be called upon to offer courses twice in an academic year. While students desired the three year programme, they sometimes complained of the work load..

The flexibility of the programme is also reflected in the change in programme delivery. In the conception of the programme, the print material, online tutorials and face-to-face teaching were to be used for course delivery because of the limited access to teleconference facilities. With actual implementation of the History content course(s), a limited number of teleconference sessions were used to introduce the course(s), for feedback and to give the students the opportunity to address problems. With the reduction of the time to complete the degree, six courses were presented online. The other four courses continued to be delivered face-to-face during the summer.

While it was administratively challenging and required the collaborative work of the project office, Department of History and university administration, the successful ongoing adjustments indicate that there are workable options outside the usual structure of the university's programme.

COURSE DEVELOPMENT AND WRITING

The Department of History and Archaeology had limited exposure to open and distance learning began before involvement in this programme. The material was largely presented in lecture format using both print and teleconference. The conferences were lecture/discussions with students participating through presentations on assigned activities as with face-to-face lecture/tutorial course delivery. Little attention was given to the pedagogical skills in the design of the material. The Bachelor of Education Secondary (Distance) programme demanded much more than lectures with a few tutorials. The course material had to be developed with goals, general objectives and learning outcomes. The learning outcomes informed content and learning and assessment activities. Equivalency with the face-to-face offerings, a major concern, was ensured as the course offered were drawn from the existing programme and writers/peer reviewers/course leaders were on faculty or were established adjunct lecturers. Initially, with the blend of print driven approach and face-to-face delivery, the fit seemed easy but as the programme shifted to online, it offered greater challenges in blending the traditional forms of assessment with online assessment. On going assessment online, not the usual face-to-face testing at intervals became a necessary component to motivate students to interact online with the course leader/peers.

The development of course material was challenging. There was little time to train lecturers to write for distance and to internalise the pedagogical skills required. With the need to produce course readers, the task of developing a course guide became a little more problematic with course writers' knowledge that students would have limited access to the array of books in the library. The university library facilitates students' access to the library holdings through a special librarian. However the process, within the semester system, could be counter-productive. The course writers' responsibility to provide additional reading material was great. It was not merely creating a booklist, but carefully selecting articles/book chapters that offered a range of information and interpretations. For History, the ideal would be to find a book to cover the course content if not the range of interpretations. This was not possible for most courses. Research and collation of information are important skills for the students of History. Distance learning challenges the traditional way(s) of teaching these skills. Teaching historiographical analysis increases the challenge.

The original idea was to have course readers produced by the University Press but this did not materialise, largely as a result of time constraints. A limited number of texts were placed at the University Centres and selected book chapters/articles copied and packaged for students (with copyright permission). One obvious solution is to find online material which can be accessed by students. The problem arises however where reputable academic sources available to the

students from online sources are not normally available from off campus computers. Even where links can be made to other less restricted material, the challenge of access to online material remains great.

The challenges in this area point to a great need – the production of readers for online History courses. The challenge could be reduced with collaborative work among faculty. Collaborative work among faculty is an important component of course development for open and distance learning. Few courses in face-face-face required the input and collaboration of different faculty members. Open and distance learning programmes required this; the writer, the peer reviewer and the course leader contribute to the final product.

COURSE DELIVERY

The History courses are offered either by distance or face-to-face. The latter becomes easier for the course leader as it is the accustomed mode of delivery and it's the preferred mode for some students. Online teaching seems to be more time consuming for both students and teacher, especially when there is an attempt to use mixed modalities for online interaction. The reduction to a three years degree programme and the switch to online delivery produced its own problems and challenges for the students scattered across an island with limited or unreliable internet access..

Subject Coordinating

The project nature of the programme meant that there were different sets of administrative needs from those of the traditional programme. The project office administered the overall programme but had to liaise with the department which had responsibility for content delivery to see that the courses met the required standard. The subject coordinator is an important link in this liaison. The office was created to facilitate the smooth delivery of courses in this multidisciplinary programme. The annual adjustment in the programme emphasized the role of the subject coordinator who collaborated with the programme administrators and liaise with course leaders to ensure readiness to teach at new times, sometimes twice per year. This was markedly different from the face-to-face programme where Level Two and Level Three courses are not usually repeated within the academic year although there is an increasing move towards summer school which facilitates this.

The Bachelor of Education Secondary (Distance) programme was offered by the University of the West Indies as a special project so it was not a part of the usual work load of the participating staff. It was grafted unto the work of the department transforming it in the short term to a dual mode department. It is in this context that the coordinator serves as a resource person with the department, acting as the 'distance education expert' who helps the department to carry out the additional tasks grafted onto to the existing ones. The coordinator mobilizes and introduces the writers to the instructional design template and pedagogical considerations required for the task. This is especially important in a subject area where the methods and skills of teaching were not until recently the primary concerns of university teachers and in a context where there is hardly enough time to train lecturers in writing for distance.

The coordinator's value also rests in an under utilised area – liaison with the students. The coordinator is the face of the History Department they see at orientation and so provides a constant for students in the History option who are unlikely to have contact with any one course leader for the duration of the programme. This type of interaction seems important to students as they try to make the transition from the mindset of having face-to-face interaction with the course leaders. This desire was registered in a letter to the editor of the Jamaica Gleaner:

You may be lucky if a lecturer calls you in for a face-to-face session during the whole semester...if you want something clarified you rarely get an answer...We are treated unfairly except by lecturers we see when we go on campus for six weeks in the summer.”
(January 28, 2008, 7)

Such a person is clearly not making use of the office of the Subject Coordinator who might not be able to meet face-to-face but could help to work through the difficulties on a one-to-one basis.

Course Leading

Probably the most challenging aspect of the programme is the course delivery online because students seemed less ready and willing to adapt to online programmes. At the beginning of the programme all units in an online course were opened to the students who simply went online and downloaded the material. Most returned online only to upload learning activities or an assessment. Chat rooms were not utilised. Journaling was avoided by most participants. So the course leader was unable to assess on an ongoing basis the extent to which participants were internalising the material enough for application. A strategy of opening units periodically did not bring the desired results. Even when the number of online activities was reduced it was still a challenge to get full participation, even when they were graded as a part of the final mark for the course. Some participants complained of too many assignments. This is what one student said: "With regards to the course and lack of participation on my part which is not intentional but the time given to complete the various discussions is too close behind each other. I cannot get enough time to complete one discussion before another is asked for." The student only had internet access at work or at the University Centre to which she was attached. The real problem seems to be not so much the work load in History; the student cited the fact that she had other courses doing. In terms of equivalency with the face-to-face programme, she would be expected to have a minimum of three online hours per week one devoted to the actual online activity.

The online delivery pre-supposes that students have access to the computer. The centres are not necessarily readily available to participants who work, live in the more remote areas sometimes as many as 20 miles from a university centre and have no other means of accessing the information. It means that the hours available for optimum use of online material and participating in online activities is vastly reduced. So the online experience is affected by participants' access to computer. Chat room times are difficult to arrange because of the same problem. The forum discussion, when graded as part of the final assessment, produces the best 'interaction'. Yet most participants demonstrate very little reflection on the online material and even less of any additional reading. It is too often treated as an essay to be uploaded, with no response to the input of others participants.

The challenge to course leading is how to get students to participate for learning at a higher level. The challenge on one hand is the same as the face-to-face students, but with the weekly interaction with the latter one has a better chance to react and proffer solutions to the deficiencies identified. Failure of the students to make online activity a habit makes it difficult to know the learner and so help in their cognitive development.

Students not only seem to prefer the summer face-to-face component of the programme as they can interact with faculty, but also prefer see it as a time when there is less competition with their work as teacher. This was succinctly expressed by one student who has completed the programme: "Nothing can compare to meeting your lecturers face-to-face. The substantive content of the course comes alive when one sees the passion of the course leader. Remember, enthusiasm is contagious. I fed off my lecturers." The question then is how to convey that passion at a distance. The same student admitted that "the advent of online material added a new dimension to the Teaching/Learning experience" but added that sometimes technology failed. So his 'preference' for online was at the same level as print and teleconference and lower than summer-face-to-face.

The challenge faced with teaching online is reflected in the students' response to testing online. Assignments of the traditional variety produce the best results. These are of two types – tests done face-to-face at the university centres and research essays forwarded through the centres to the course leaders. Attempts to get assignments uploaded invariably result in students missing the deadline and being denied access. Online testing created problems; the course leader has to be available throughout the day to set new questions as there are invariably complaints of shutdowns or power cut. As one student puts it, "sometimes the quality of work is hampered by interruptions of the systems." What operated then is a distance programme where face-face-to

face methods of testing continue to provide the most reliable form of assessment in terms of maximum participation of students. This worked because it is local to Jamaica but will have other challenges as it is expanded across the Caribbean.

The blended approach may be the best mode for distance delivery in Teacher education, where those learners who have challenges in accessing the internet can comfortably participate in the course using printed material and focused and concentrated face-to-face delivery with time off from their usual work. The experiences of the learners in this teacher education programme suggest that for effective incorporation of remote areas of Jamaica in any distance learning programme the print media is not abandoned and traditional method of testing be retained

FROM FACE-TO-FACE TO DISTANCE

The University of the West Indies/ Ministry of Education has not only broadened the scope of distance education in Jamaica through the Bachelor of Education Secondary (Distance) programme, but has developed a model and stimulus for using the blended approach in upgrading teachers at a distance. It has resulted in the production of a small cadre of subject experts in the History Department who now have become writers of distance learning material and in the process have garnered skills which will invariably impact on their delivery of the face-to-face programme. One important observation is the application of the basic skill of designing learning outcomes in the course review programmes which can only improve course delivery and assessment, especially in a context where learners seems to be less ready for independent study at the university level.. Those persons who participate in the writing for distance finds it easier to grasp what is required.

Most importantly it has shown how teacher education can be advanced and upgraded while they are on the job. Students testify of the benefits and the challenges: One current student wrote:

I have gained tremendously from this programme increased and advanced knowledge, personal development and computer literacy... [but there is] dissatisfaction with some services as it relates to some courses offered and feedback from some lecturers. Some times we are not aware whether we are swimming or sinking until we see a big F for our grade."

One graduate states:

The access we had to the campus in the summer was phenomenal...it was the online component of the programme that brought many of us back to the technological age. We were forced to mix traditional method of research with more modern techniques and sources....I really appreciate the opportunity of acquiring my first degree without accessing study leave. Consequently I am now able to use my accumulated leave for graduate studies.

In spite of the challenges, the opportunity granted has widen the possibilities for these teachers: at least one member of the first graduates is already enrolled in a Master of Philosophy (History) programme. It is an opportunity for the university to develop taught graduate level courses for open and distance learning for teachers.

