

Staff Development In Distance Education: The Evolution Of One Approach

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ABSTRACT

The International Extension College (IEC), UK, and Kyambogo University (KU), Uganda, are working together on a training programme for KU's ODL staff, using an ODL model. This paper discusses the pedagogical and technical approach of the programme. It also examines the reasons for the success of this collaborative venture and presents lessons for the future.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT IN ODL

There are plenty of ODL institutions which provide fulltime or on-the-job training for their staff. Interestingly, however, there don't seem to be many prominent examples of institutions which use ODL for staff training and development. The Indira Gandhi National Open University in India is an honourable exception. So is CDEP (Southern Africa), which is a programme for staff of institutions in more than one country. As a regional course, CDEP has succeeded in modelling good ODL practice and promoting a learner centred approach. [Not surprisingly, isolated or remote CDEP learners have experienced problems with delivery of the course services and have suffered from lack of support. But the providers are committed to addressing these issues and improving the course's coverage and usefulness, as well as the recognition and reward offered to those who complete it successfully (Nonyongo & Kuhn, n.d.).]

There is a small literature on staff development in ODL. Reviewing it raises the question whether ODL is an underused approach to training. The UKOU, for example, doesn't use ODL for staff development (Sewart, 1998, 149). Lentell's regular staff development column in *Open praxis* for 10 years from 1993 never examined it, though she took some swipes at the cookbook approach to training manuals. Rather few of the contributors to Latchem &

Lockwood (1998) deal with ODL as a tool for staff development. An exception is Gunn & Panko, who describe a staff development course using self-study.

What Randell & Bitzer (1998: 139) say about South Africa is true more widely: 'Overcoming years of reinforcement of a teacher-focused model of teaching and learning and changing underlying conceptions of learning and teaching will be a lengthy process requiring a great deal of skilful professional development.' The needs in many other developing countries are the same: 'Course and materials developers need to be enabled to develop programmes which encourage deep and autonomic learning and which are culturally and linguistically appropriate. Tutors and counsellors need to acquire new student-centred approaches to teaching and learning and develop their diagnostic, problem-solving and inter-personal skills in assisting culturally diverse students. Managers and administrators need to be given the knowledge and ability to provide and evaluate relevant support systems for staff' (Randell & Bitzer, 1998: 141).

Lentell (1994) identifies an important tension between what tutors and managers look for in staff development. On the one hand, practitioners demand the development of a professional learning community, i.e. a learning organisation. On the other, distance education managers have seen their major task as 'to brief and train tutors in a new mode of delivery and not to encourage ongoing learning'. 'Failure to address this contradiction will lead to a cynicism among staff and a sense that the language of staff development is merely empty rhetoric' (30).

Dillon and Walsh, in a review of the distance education journal literature, concluded that 'faculty [teaching staff] development programmes designed to promote distance teaching are concerned primarily with training and do little to encourage or support a dramatic restructuring of faculty roles' (16-17). They identified the issue of learner ownership, for which such change in academic culture is necessary, as central to the development and successful diffusion of distance education (17).

IEC'S EXPERIENCE

IEC is a small British educational non-governmental organisation that was established in 1971 for the purpose of using distance education to benefit people not provided for in mainstream education in developing countries. Its core activity is the provision of consultancy, training, information and technical support to institutions, governments and projects, in the design,

development, delivery and evaluation of open and distance learning (ODL) programmes.

IEC can claim always to have recognised that distance educators need to experience distance education from the learner's perspective to fully understand their roles (see Haag, 1992, 73). Its training manuals were offered as correspondence courses more than twenty years ago. Fifteen years ago it developed a print plus audio international MA in Distance Education for the University of London, and also used this experience in putting together a series of training toolkits for distance educators for the Commonwealth of Learning and the Asian Development Bank.

IEC has also participated in very many residential courses run by individual programmes and providers over the years. But our own introduction to distance education course, *Distance education for development (DED)*, was always run face-to-face in London – for over twenty years. This reflected the importance of participants learning from each other – and IEC learning from the participants. During this time we frequently revised and reorganised both our content and our delivery. Improvements were based mainly on our own experience and participants' feedback. Despite offering higher level staff development programmes at a distance, IEC had not so far bitten the bullet of developing a distance version of DED.

THE KYAMBOGO UNIVERSITY (KU) COURSE

IEC is currently collaborating with the Department of Distance Education at Kyambogo University in a capacity building support project for teacher education at a distance. This is a five-year human resource development (HRD) programme, with funding from the Nuffield Foundation, which began in April 2001. It includes a print-based ODL course for staff coming to ODL for the first time, developed by IEC and managed, tutored and assessed by KU.

KU plays the leading role in teacher education in Uganda, with responsibility for matters relating to teacher training throughout the country. It provides pre-service and in-service training, and works with teachers' colleges to develop curricula and improve standards of education. One of its training programmes is an in-service primary teachers' diploma programme delivered at a distance, the Diploma in Education Primary External (DEPE). KU sets examinations, awards certificates and diplomas, and serves as a resource centre for education services, research and publications.

A course called *Introduction to distance education* is part of the HRD programme. It is designed to introduce the practice of ODL to managers and lecturers in Ugandan Primary Teachers' Colleges (PTCs), National Teachers' Colleges (NTCs) and KU, who are involved in the delivery of DEPE. The aim is to reach as many as possible of those involved in ODL or likely to be interested in it for teacher education, in order to increase the size of the pool of trained people available to develop the ODL work of KU.

The idea of offering a one-year ODL course emerged from an initial training needs assessment workshop. Offering the course by correspondence and face-to-face makes it possible to combine KU's resources in Uganda with IEC's already developed curriculum. A course consisting of three modules, delivered over a period of three terms to coincide with school terms, was specially developed, on the basis of DED. The first cohort took the course from January 2002; the second started in February 2004.

We assumed that:

- with the requisite skills KU would be able to do a more professional job with its current ODL courses and be able to extend the number and type of courses it can offer
- and that the use of ODL would:
- motivate the participants to learn
- encourage the functioning of learning circles
- teach participants to empathise with their students.

We designed the programme to minimise the risks of failure by:

- incorporating in-country support from PTCs
- involving past learners on IEC courses and experienced distance educators as tutors
- integrating face-to-face sessions into the delivery model
- enabling new knowledge and skills to be put to immediate use (a benefit even for non-completers).

Cross-cultural transfer was an issue. 'Staff development for distance education needs to be sensitive to the fact that learner autonomy may be valued differently by the teacher's and learners' respective cultures' (Matthewson & Thaman, 1998, 119-120). The materials for this course were created by writers familiar with teacher education in Uganda, and were pre-tested by Ugandans.

Delivery, support to and administration of the programme are handled in country by the Coordinator and a small team of Ugandan tutors, all of whom

had had previous training experience in ODL. Tutors receive further induction to the course as it progresses. The initial training of trainers was undertaken by IEC, but subsequent sessions were facilitated by the Coordinator. Now that the one-year course is being repeated, the Coordinator is leading all the training himself.

Following the mid-term external evaluation (see below), funds were diverted from the overseas training budget, which would have benefited two people directly, to running the one year distance course for a further 50 participants, as a more effective use of resources.

THE APPROACH

Our approach with this course is consistent with that of Haigh (1998, 183), who describes his approach to staff development in open and flexible learning as offering a 'self-directed learning package'. But he uses ODL only at the outset, and prefers to work face-to-face for further exploration (184). What he says about setting a modest agenda certainly corresponds with the thinking of our course developers:

I observe that 'getting practical experience' needs to be a priority when we are novices, because it is from experience that we will learn many of the important things to do with using skills well. Often I need to resist my inclination as an enthusiastic teacher to overwhelm them with a surfeit of 'good ideas that they could try out' – particularly ideas that will not be fully meaningful when they lack experiences to relate them to (188).

(Whether all our course participants would agree that we set a modest agenda is not so clear. But the overwhelming message from the evaluations of the course, which we come to below, is that they relished the challenges of both new approaches and new knowledge.)

We believed that first hand experience of what it is like to study at a distance would provide the best understanding of learners' material, support and delivery needs. Trainers, tutors, lecturers, college principals and administrators who have experienced ODL themselves are likely to empathise much more with their students, and will be better informed when it comes to design and delivery of suitable courses. This was demonstrated in earlier experience in Uganda, when IEC raised funds to enable teacher educators in the NITEP project to study at a distance at postgraduate diploma level

(Wrightson, 1998:42), as well as in IEC collaborations in other countries. In each case a group of staff enrolled on courses from the University of London External MA in Distance Education. The learners worked independently but with peer group support and were very successful in maintaining study and achieving good results (unpublished data, IEC). In the KU project it was possible to take this a stage further and develop a course designed for the specific needs of a relatively homogeneous group of teacher educators, all working in the same ODL programme.

Application

The course was designed so that participants would be in a position to put what they had learned in to practice immediately. Wherever possible examples and activities draw on the day-to-day experience of the participants, making the learning highly relevant and practical.

In this way the training programmes offered by KU can be updated and improved on a continuing basis and with immediate impact. For example, the assignment in the materials development module is to evaluate sample materials from KU's Diploma in Education Primary External (DEPE). The Assistant ODL Coordinator collected together all the critiques produced by the first batch of learners to collate and analyse, in order to make revisions to these materials.

Many course participants commented on the power of evaluating their own materials:

especially the writers who seem to have accepted the evaluation with good humour and humility...The materials they reviewed had up to then been a source of some pride, so this was a real eye opener!

Graham and Tierney, 2003:8

The learning is spaced out to give time for lessons learned to be put into practice and takes into account people's capacity to absorb new ideas and techniques. Skills and ideas are reinforced through the residential sessions and the variety of learning experiences offered, as well as by colleagues who are also learning. Reaching a larger number of learners through ODL means that there are more colleagues with a shared understanding of the topics with whom to interact.

Technology

Although KU is the lead institution for teacher education in Uganda, its funding is not adequate for any significant investment in technology. Its

registry still uses a paper based record system which often proves inefficient, as documents get lost or are difficult to find.

DDE has been dependent on the HRD project for a small amount of computer equipment and Internet connectivity, though KU is in the process of taking over these costs. It is still unthinkable that DDE should use the Internet to download materials or for interactive learning with teachers. What connectivity there is with some PTCs, and it is minimal, is made available to DEPE trainees during face-to-face sessions. Teachers living and working within reach of these PTCs may also get some access during term time.

The one-year ODL course in fact uses a delivery system very similar to KU's DEPE programme: printed modules and face-to-face residential sessions. The choice of this low tech approach has to be seen in the context of connectivity in Uganda.

The advance of the mobile telephone is making communication possible without so much travelling as in the past. KU's Department of Distance Education (DDE) is actively seeking ways to use this technology to benefit its students.

EVALUATION

The mid-term review of the HRD programme undertaken on behalf of the funder concluded:

The one year course has been the single most important activity of the project so far. Virtually all of those enrolled (tutors, administrators, PTC and NTC principals and others involved in DE) completed the course...It appears to have been a really exciting and transforming experience – inspiring people, making them realise from their own experience just what learners need, and bringing people together in peer groups and experiencing a level of support that has had a profound effect on many of those I talked to.

Graham & Tierney (2003) pp. 5-6

In addition to the skills and learning, many also cited the experience of peer group support as a major element of the course, which may also have had the additional benefit of building relationships and teamwork throughout what is essentially a decentralised operation. People had been kept going through

family crises – and in one case a serious accident – a really powerful sense of support which it was clear several people still missed.

...In terms of capacity building activities as a whole [the Head of KU's DDE, and project coordinator] noted that the one year course was far more cost effective than funding 10 individuals for further [fulltime academic] study. They are few, difficult to choose and the effect is isolated, in contrast to the effect of the course.

Graham & Tierney (2003) pp. 8-11

The course is the key part. It puts people in the customer's shoes – a complete reversal which has had a very powerful effect. Effectively the course has been a Trojan horse bringing about major cultural changes in attitudes and practice as well as skills. I was also struck by the way this is a complex decentralised organisational change experience – and one which would be useful to monitor and learn from a systems change perspective as well as from the distance learning perspective.

Graham & Tierney (2003) p. 14

Our own evaluation, based on stakeholders, tutors and 49 learners' returns, independently came to many of the same conclusions.

The distance study course seems to have been of particular value in the sharing together of the ups and downs of isolated study and the camaraderie of the face-to-face tutorials and workshops. These brought together people from diverse jobs and locations with a unifying interest in teacher education. This experience of peer group support seems to lay down a strong foundation on which to improve and promote ODL for teacher education in Uganda.

This form of training has proved so successful and popular that the course is being run again for a further 50 learners. It is worth noting that running the course for a second cohort brings the cost per learner down significantly. If funds were available for a third cohort, it would fall further still (see Table 1).

Table 1. Costs per learner

Cohort (number of learners)	Cost per learner (including development and revision costs)
1 (70)	£590
2 (50)	£420
3 (50)	£344

This is not to say that the course was cheap. It would have been possible to reach the same number through intensive short workshops for a similar cost. But it would not have been possible to provide the depth of knowledge in that time, or to enable participants to apply the skills so effectively to their working lives; nor would they have enjoyed the first hand experience of being ODL students. Future research, as planned by KU, into the impact of the course will further elucidate its real value, but from the evidence available so far it seems to be a cost-effective programme of training.

LESSONS

In ODL, inter-institutional collaboration is increasing in importance. Sharing the costs of course development through co-development, sales and leasing arrangements makes sense. However, as Spronk observes, such collaboration is by no means easy to establish or maintain (Spronk, 1998:130). Trust and respect are crucial for all those involved. In our case, KU and IEC already had a good relationship and there was a desire in both to cooperate further. And the HRD project was designed to build on the relationship and to be flexible. 'Multilateral collaboration [in staff development] may be problematic but long-term bilateral relations serve well' (Koul, 1998, 83).

In addition, both partners recognised the importance of:

- the receptiveness of this group of learners, as compared with many academics (Abdullah, 1998: 87)
- judging the appropriateness of the methods and content: 'What is modern in one context is already dated, or outdated, in another, and only a dream for the future in yet another...With a relatively small clientele and pragmatic projections for human-resource requirements, *participatory* models emphasising more *reflective* approaches may be employed' (Koul, 1998: 82-3).
- emphasising and demonstrating the critical importance of learner support: 'many support functions ...are taken for granted by faculty and students accustomed to on-campus classes. Distance education programme developers... need to ensure that their students not only have access to those... , but also to... technical and logistical support, psycho-social or affective support and tutorial/counselling/mentoring support' (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1998). [The importance of the UK Open University model of student support is reflected in Module 1 of our course (see Sewart, 1998, 149).]
- validation by evaluation.

We had the advantage of starting with a curriculum which had evolved over time and space. But we still managed to generate the familiar problem of student overload in the self-study part of the course, particularly by setting demanding and time consuming assignments.

Face-to-face work is crucially important, but so too are the (also familiar) problems of money, transport and accommodation. 'Under these circumstances, programmes that are as flexible as possible in allowing students to work with others, catch up on late assignments, or receive extra help from the instructor are going to be the most successful in helping students to achieve their goals' (Spronk, 1998, 133).

It was not always possible to deliver all aspects of the distance study course on time. Delays in the shipment of materials, and in the receipt of funds by the local bank and approval for release of funds from the KU accounts, led to the postponement of one or two activities. These were also useful learning experiences for the participants – knowing first hand what not to do can also be powerful. One of DDE's current targets is to improve logistics.

THE FUTURE

The human resource development project with KU is, at the time of writing, half way through its implementation. There are a number of pointers towards what is making change possible in KU. The indications are that the most important of these has been the empathetic experience of learning about ODL by doing it: by studying at a distance.

A second cohort is studying the materials this year and research has been commissioned that will consider the impact of the first run of the course on its participants' professional lives and the organisation of ODL in their institutions. It will be possible to return to this programme to consider the impact of this method (and content) of training on change at KU and to see whether we can confirm the conclusions drawn so far.

We would like to find a way of offering people who complete this course some kind of accredited certificate which would count towards a recognised qualification. This is an issue that came up in our evaluation, and which needs to be pursued.

At the same time as this course is being offered to a clearly defined group of educators in one country, IEC is working on ways of making the same basic

curriculum available more widely. Organisations in other developing countries have approached us about running a version of it for similar groups. And we are actively involved in developing with the Institute of Education in London a course to replace the original residential DED. This will be delivered internationally using a low cost strategy and appropriate technologies – probably print with email tutorial support, and the option for students to work together using email contact.

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