## The Facilitation of Learning: A UNHCR Case Study in Experiential and Collaborative Learning

Kate Hand, Distance Learning Consultant

*The learning community is an excellent innovation in UNHCR learning programmes. I learned quite a few things from other colleagues' experiences and suggestions and we exchanged some stellar ideas. All of this motivated me to introduce some ideas in my office, which were welcomed both by staff and management.*

Facilitation of Learning pilot participant

### Introduction

Online communities provide a chance for people to exchange information, to learn from their peers and to validate their profession by experiencing the benefits of 'belonging'. These virtual kinships are also extremely useful in distance learning situations, as they help foster a personal touch to an otherwise solitary and often lonely learning experience. Despite distances, friendships develop, groups work together and also experience traditional group dynamics.

In this presentation I will discuss how and why I developed a distance learning programme for United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) staff. The Facilitation of Learning programme includes experiential and collaborative learning to help bridge digital and geographical divides and to promote a 'learning community' of practitioners across the organisation. This community is created through a moderated email group discussion that supports the paper-based distance learning programme. In the recent pilot session, 29 participants used the learning community to share thoughts, feedback and work towards a face-to-face workshop, which was prepared and delivered entirely by themselves, for themselves.

### Background

The Facilitation of Learning programme is designed and developed for UNHCR staff who support, organise and deliver training to other staff members. This training of trainers offers an overview of learning methodologies and provides tools to help these staff work more efficiently.

Participants also have the opportunity to "meet" and work with their peers in the organisation; a request that was clearly indicated in all areas of the programme needs assessment. The majority of the target audience works in isolation, without support or even full-time responsibility for training.

Participants also gain increased access to the headquarters-based Staff Development Section who administers the Facilitation of Learning programme. This is a valuable communication channel for both the participants and the section, as the learning community and course content allow each side to share

messages and make requests, which relate to the role of the Staff Development Section and learning in the organisation.

## Programme Details

Since distance learning is relatively new to the organisation, the majority of the target audience is unfamiliar with this type of learning experience and with email-based discussion groups and online chats. The role of the programme moderator is therefore crucial to help facilitate discussions. In addition, the moderator can provide individual support and confidence building outside of the main discussion groups.

The community also helps participants overcome their hesitations about this new format, as they confess their fears or lack of knowledge to their peers and discover that they are not alone. The learning community becomes a safe environment for participants to ask questions, plead ignorance and share victories and defeats.

To increase community bonding, participants are divided into two groups and given the task to develop and deliver the face-to-face workshop component of the programme. They work at a distance on the various elements of logistics, planning and content development and then deliver the workshop to themselves. This technique brings out the weaknesses and the strengths of the groups and challenges participants to overcome distances and time zones to work together on a deadline-based project.

## Presentation

During this presentation, I will share the results from the pilot session of this programme, discuss the online community and explain why one group was able to successfully develop and deliver their workshop while another group had to scramble at the last minute to pull something together. I will also share feedback from pilot participants and recommendations for improving this model.