

International Distance Education Trends and Issues

Open and Distance Learning Teacher Education in Uganda

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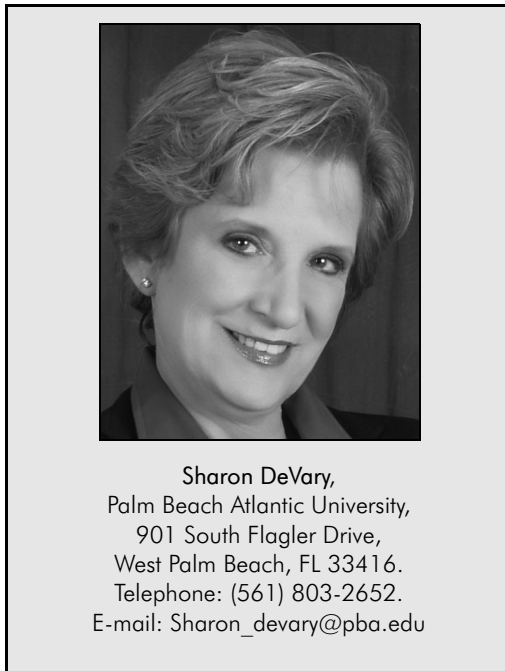
INTRODUCTION

The world is evolving into a global village as a result of the rapid development of information and communication technology (Adam, Awerbuch, Slonim, Wegner, & Yeshea, 1997). Economics play a major role in the move toward a global economy. Exports and

imports account for about 50% of the U.S. economy. The ability to compete globally is dependent on the innovation, the skill, and the knowledge of people and their learning organizations. This force is being felt across the globe and touches all economies including those of the third and fourth world.

In addition, the emergence of “knowledge” as an economy is creating an increasing demand for education. This is seen when companies move their training into global arenas. The biggest challenges that are faced are those in the worldwide variations in social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances (Wellins & Rioux, 2000). Language differences, educational systems, learning and teaching styles, government regulations, and infrastructures are also examples of these variations. To adapt training to multicultural settings requires a new paradigm that includes an understanding of the deeper psychology of culture and the uniqueness of the differences culture brings to the global workplace.

This article explores the issue of distance education and the development of teacher education in Uganda. Ely (1996) defines an issue as a fact or matter that is in dispute



between two or more parties. For example, a question is debated among the experts who are trying to find a solution. In order to find a solution, individuals often look for data about the issue, and draw on past experiences for additional insight, clarity, or guidance in developing a solution.

FUNDING ISSUES

Education is the means to build human capital. Today, both developing and industrialized countries recognize that global productivity and competitiveness are enhancing the caliber and resilience of the workforce (Shive & Jegede, 2001). For many countries, distance education provides the sole opportunity for their populations to have access to education. This is particularly true for third- and fourth-world countries. These countries most often do not have the resources to support the needs of a distance education system.

ISSUES OF INCREASED DEMAND

According to Hulsmann (2004), there is an ever-increasing demand for distance education in developing countries. However, because of the lack of funding and commitment to educational investments, the quality of education has suffered and has not produced enough trained teachers to meet the demand. This can be seen in the Improving Access and Quality of Teacher Education in Africa Program. This program faces critical challenges including an increasing number of students seeking access to education while simultaneously facing a lack of adequately qualified personnel.

RESEARCH ISSUES

According to Shive and Jegede (2001), research must be distance education's next important development. Distance education has a history of being application-driven rather than research-driven. Past

research has drawn on theories and methodologies from multiple disciplines.

Some of the problems facing distance education that must be overcome in order to improve the quality of education are how to expand the reach of distance education, reduce inequalities in meeting global learning needs, enhancing the learning experience by fitting the learner's context, and the availability of technology (Daniel & Mackintosh 2005).

Perhaps by establishing an international research agenda that features systematic in-depth analyses, theoretical comparisons of strategies for fostering transformative learning, and the use of alternative methodological designs, some of these problems can be addressed. Distance education research needs to focus on particular components that are known as essential to distance education, such as course design, pedagogy, interaction, class size, and active learning. Summative and formative evaluations are also needed so that learning gains are empirically documented (Bork & Gunnarsdottir, 2001).

ACCREDITATION ISSUES

Accreditation is an area in which educational globalization lags behind economic globalization. Economic globalization has benefited from deregulation for financial markets and reductions in tariffs that allow a fluid flow of goods and services. However, the educational sector is underdeveloped. This is a problem for countries outside the United States on a national and international level. An international system for transferring credits from one university to another would greatly increase the market for global higher education. Unless the monopoly on accreditation held by universities is relaxed, organizations offering courses and educational opportunities that are in demand from the market place. An example of this is information technology accreditation offered by Microsoft certification. In many cases, this

certification is valued more highly than a bachelor of science in computing.

CULTURAL ISSUES

Culture is a complex and broad concept, which can be defined in many ways. Culture involves at least three components: what people think, what they do, and the material products they produce (Boldley, 1994; Roblyer, Dozier-Henry, & Burnette, 1996). Culture, shared among society members consciously and unconsciously, shape values, assumptions, perceptions, and behavior. In order to understand the way cultural issues impact distance education, it is necessary to analyze a culture with its unique characteristics and variations.

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING TEACHER EDUCATION IN UGANDA: THE NATIONAL CHALLENGE

During the 1960s, distance education was introduced into Uganda, taking the form of correspondence schools and British correspondence colleges. The late 1970s and 1980s were years of upheaval in Uganda. During that time, distance education made little progress. It was not until the early 1990s that donor funding sponsored distance education projects. These initiatives, for the most part, have ended, but were replaced with the Mubende Integrated Teacher Education project (MITEP). This project was responsible for distance education programs becoming available in northern Uganda. Distance education has continued to expand in spite of the difficulties of civil wars. Scholars such as Aguti (2000), Nsamba and Atim (2004), and Bbuye (1999) observed that Uganda has realized steady growth in the development of distance education. In addition, the Kironde Report (1996) focused on the need to provide continuing education to various populations in Uganda and recommended

that correspondence education be expanded. It was also recommended that the Makerere University provide distance education courses. This initiative eventually led to the establishment of an Open University in Uganda. Makerere University was the pioneer for providing correspondence courses.

What Randell and Blitzer (1998) said about teacher training for South Africa is also true for Uganda: overcoming years of reinforcement for 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 skillful professional development. Course and material developers need to develop programs that encourage deep and automatic learning that are culturally and linguistically appropriate. Tutors and counselors need to acquire new student-centered approaches to teaching and learning. In addition, they need to develop diagnostic, problem-solving and interpersonal skills in assisting culturally diverse students. Managers and administrators need to possess the knowledge and ability to provide and evaluate relevant support systems for staff. Randell and Blitzer identified an important tension between what tutors and managers look for in staff development and what practitioners demand the development of a professional learning community (the learning organization).

Dillon and Walsh (1992), in a review of the distance education literature, found that faculty development programs designed to promote distance teaching are concerned primarily with training and do not support a restructuring of faculty roles. They noted that learners will only take ownership of their learning when there is a change in their academic culture. This change is central to the development and successful diffusion of distance education.

INTEGRATED TEACHER EDUCATION

From 1993 through 1998, an Integrated Teacher Integration Project was established by the World Bank in Northern Uganda. It was managed by the International Extension College of the United Kingdom.

This project was part of a wider project called the Northern Uganda Reconstruction Program (NURP). This was an effort to restore and reconstruct the devastated northern areas of Uganda as a result of a 10-year civil war. This project trained 3,000 untrained teachers in northern and north-eastern Uganda (Ordukene, 1995).

In order to guarantee quality, students of the course took the same exams given to primary teachers, and there was an abundance of resources, including the use of personal tutors. Wrightson (1998) claimed that 64% of the teachers trained passed their courses and increased the population of teachers in Northern Uganda by 53%. The program had a relatively low dropout rate of 11%. Although this project could be claimed to be a success, it ceased when the funding was finished. Unfortunately, distance education again experienced a setback when local and central governments could not pay the cost of maintaining the project.

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Another approach used to develop distance education teaching staff in Uganda was the use of the open and distance learning (ODL) model. The International Extension College (IEC) of the United Kingdom and Kyambogo University (KU) in Uganda collaborated on a training program for distance education teachers. This project resulted in insights into pedagogical and technical issues and provided a look at the program's successes that can be applied in future programs. Some of the advantages for using the ODL model for teacher training are:

1. ODL opportunities for learning are flexible and free of time constraints of time and place of study.
2. ODL can be implemented on a large scale while maintaining quality and cost-effectiveness.
3. ODL is learner centered, creating greater interaction between learners, resources, tutors, and instructors.
4. ODL has a capacity to deliver both quality learning resources and operate effective systems of student support.
5. ODL can provide opportunities for professional development and upgrading without taking the teacher in training away from the workplace.
6. ODL materials can be customized to local needs and priorities.

THE APPROACH

The IEC and KU used the ODL model in the same manner employed by Haigh (1998). He called his approach a "self-directed learning package." His approach earned this description because it was used only at the beginning of the training program, to then be followed by face-to-face educational methods. This approach functions under the assumption that getting practical experience needs to be a priority when learners are novices. It is thought that it is from experience that learners learn how to properly apply learned skills.

Trainers, tutors, lecturers, college principals, and administrators who have personally experienced ODL are likely to empathize with their students, and will be better informed when it comes to the design and delivery of suitable courses. This was demonstrated in Uganda through earlier teacher education practices using ODL as a result of the IEC using funds to enable teacher educators to study at a distance at postgraduate diploma level, as well as in IEC collaborations in other countries (Wrightson, 1998).

An example of this was seen when a group of staff enrolled in courses provided

by the University of London External MA in Distance Education. The learners who worked independently but with peer group support were successful in maintaining their studies while achieving positive results. The KU project made it possible to take this approach a step further when courses were designed for the specific needs of a relatively homogeneous group of teacher educators, all working in the same ODL program.

THE APPLICATION

The course was designed to allow participants to immediately apply their newly learned skills. Wherever possible, examples and activities are to draw from the day-to-day experience of the participants, making the learning highly relevant and practical. In this way, the training program offered by KU can be updated and improved on a continuing basis, providing immediate impact. For example, the assignment in the materials development module was to evaluate sample materials from KU's Diploma in Education Primary External (DEPE) program. The assistant ODL coordinator collected all the critiques produced by the first batch of learners to collate and analyze, in order to make revisions to these materials.

Many course participants commented on the power of evaluating their own materials. The materials they reviewed had up to then been a source of some pride, so this was a real eye opener (Graham & Tierney, 2003). Instruction is paced in order to provide time for learners to put into practice and take into account learners' capacity to absorb new ideas and techniques. Skills and ideas are reinforced through learning sessions, the variety of learning experiences offered, and feedback from other participants, consequently reaching a large number of learners through the use of ODL results in more educators 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 that often proves inefficient, as documents get lost or are difficult to find. It is still unthinkable that the Department of Distance Education (DDE) should use the Internet to download materials or for interactive learning with teachers. What connectivity there is is minimal and is only made available to learners during face-to-face sessions. The ODL courses use delivery systems consisting of printed modules and face-to-face sessions. The choice of this low-tech approach has to be seen in the context of the issues surrounding connectivity in Uganda. The advance of the mobile telephone is making communication possible, while reducing the need to travel to training areas.

EVALUATION

The project's evaluation showed the course provided learners with exciting, transforming, and inspirational experiences. Participants noted that they realized from their own experience just what learners need and that bringing people together in peer groups and to experiencing support had a profound effect (Graham & Tierney, 2003).

In addition to the skills and learning, many also said the experience of peer-group support had the additional benefit of building relationships and teamwork throughout what is essentially a decentralized operation. In terms of capacity-building activities, it was noted that the course was far more cost-effective than funding 10 individuals for full-time academic study (Graham & Tierney, 2003).

This course seems to have been of particular value in the sharing together of the ups and downs of isolated study and the collaborative benefits of the face-to-face

tutorials and workshops. Learners from diverse jobs and locations who shared the unifying interest in teacher education were brought together. 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 proven so successful and popular that it will be continued for future training. Future research will be conducted to further the value of the project.

LESSONS

Collaborative efforts using the ODL model is essential for growth by sharing the cost of capital and human resources. However, as Spronk and Radtke (1988) observes, such collaboration is by no means easy to establish or maintain. 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. According to Koul (1998), unilateral collaboration in staff development and long-term bilateral relations are the ideals to work toward.

IEC and KU recognize the importance of the receptiveness of the group of learners, as compared with many academics (Abdullah, 1998). Also, judging the appropriateness of the course methods and content can be difficult, since 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 emphasizing more reflective approaches may be employed (Koul, 1998).

According to Spronk and Radtke (1988), it was advantageous to use a curriculum that had evolved over time. There were problems with student overload in the self-study part of the course. However, the demanding and time consuming assign-

ments were manageable. Face-to-face communications were extremely important. There were money, transportation and accommodation problems. These issues required the training programs to be flexible by allowing students to work with others, catch up on late assignments, or receive extra help from the instructors. These accommodations are critical to help students to achieve their goals.

It was not always possible to deliver all aspects of the distance study course on time. Delays in the shipment of materials, 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 by learning first hand what not to do.

CONCLUSION

We would like to find a way of offering learners who completed this course an accredited certificate that could be counted toward a recognized qualification. The IEC is working to make this same basic curriculum available to more students and to expand its geographical outreach.

Organizations in other developing countries have approached us about providing this training for similar groups. Delivering this course is being considered using a low-cost strategy and appropriate technologies such as print, e-mail tutorial support, and the option for students to work together using e-mail contact.

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