Sharing the Obstacles to Distance Education at the University of Kinshasa

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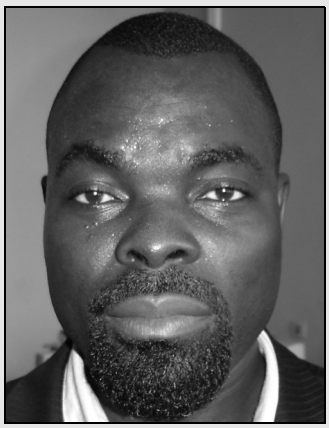
Introduction

The University of Kinshasa is the main university of the Democratic Republic of Congo. It has about 30,000 students, 10 schools, and fewer than 500 professors (with PhDs).

Attempting to catch up with the new technologies, the university, in cooperation with two Belgian associations, decided to set up a project called "Backbone." The main idea of establishing this project was to facilitate the use of information communication technology (ICT) by teachers, students, and administrators in their respective activities.



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After 5 years of this project, the situation of the use of ICT in teaching and learning activities at the University of Kinshasa has not changed and remains alarming. This is to say that the mission is not yet accomplished.

Why the Mission Failed

There are at least 10 reasons why the mission failed.

1. The Backbone project was established with the good intentions of letting professors, students, and workers have access to new technologies but the target population was not really prepared to welcome this project because of a lack of information about it.
2. The target population didn't receive enough explanation about the advantage of accessing new information and communication technologies in terms of shifting from traditional practices to new practices in their activities of teaching, learning, and working.
3. The lack of ICT management skills by the team. People accessing ICT facilities for the first time may express technophobia, resistance to change, conflict, doubt, and so on. It belongs to the management team to channel these negative behaviors into positive outcomes through encouraging the

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target population, motivating them and supporting them by drawing on skills appropriate for adult education and psychology associated with this. It is important to note that perceptions and attitudes are important in the planning for integration of ICT in open and distance learning (Chifwepa, 2009)

4. No training was prioritized. For the success of this kind of project, the training of users should be prioritized. The sad case of this Backbone project at the University of Kinshasa is that the training of users was not really taken seriously into account. The target population was only offered 2 or 3 days' training and this was not enough to accomplish training and become a good user of ICT.
5. The curriculum of the University of Kinshasa is another major issue. The credit of computer literacy courses (except in the Department of Computer Sciences) is about 45 hours (30 hours for theory and 15 hours for practice). As a university professor teaching a computer literacy course to freshmen (students coming to university with almost no knowledge of computers), I think the credit in terms of time per student is not enough; 600 students who should complete the theory of computer literacy course in 30 hours and then have 15 hours of practice. This means with 15 hours for practice between 600 students it is equal to 0.025 hours per student where they can be assisted by the professor.
6. There was a lack of an experimentation step in the implementation of the project. The project should have started with an experimental step as a way to evaluate the first stage before generalizing the project to the whole university.
7. There was a lack of ICT expertise by professors at the University of Kinshasa. In their professional life, many professors have never used PowerPoint, Word, Excel, and never heard about Dookeos and Moodle for distance and online education. It is very embarrassing for them to start to use these tools in front of students without sufficient training.
8. Psychological matters were present. Some professors think that it is a huge problem of exposing their own personality because everyone can see their mistakes and criticize their online courses
9. Professors were overscheduled. The professors of the University of Kinshasa have very busy schedules due to the shortage of professors. To decide to include ICT in their activities of teaching and learning means professors are adding even more hours to their already busy schedules. It belongs to policymakers of the Democratic Republic of Congo to think of how to dramatically reduce the busy schedules and enable professors to use ICT in their activities.
10. Technical problems caused issues. The Backbone intranet and Internet connection has been a huge obstacle to many activities such as e-mail communication, downloading documents, research online, and so on.

Strategies for Success

For good success, I suggest that:

1. Information about the project should be sufficient to let people learn more about it;
2. Information should be explained in detail, even in the local language to let parents of students learn more about the innovative project because they have input into their children's studies;
3. The manager of ICT project should be equipped with adult education and adult psychology skills so as to deeply understand the target population and

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help them solve their difficulties with dignity;

4. Provide enough time for training to allow users mastery of their activities;
5. Pay attention and be careful in the design of curriculum;
6. Think about curriculum reform in the way to introduce ICT courses;
7. Ensure adequate connection to the Internet and intranet; and
8. Recognize different cultural attitudes where it is not acceptable for a university professor not to know the answer or to be questioned publicly about content, and so on.

Conclusion

I do believe that this Congolese experience of the Backbone project can be helpful to those who are interested in the implementation of distance education in the poorer areas of the world. I should say that the situation of the Democratic Republic of Congo may be different from that in other parts of the world, but it is just my intention to share this modest Congolese experience with distance education experts around the world.

Reference

Chifwepa, V. (2009). Perceptions as factors of media selection: A case of the university of Zambia. *International Journal of Open and Distance Learning, 2*, 26

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