

Curriculum planning - the training needs

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Introduction

The starting point to any discussion on media application in an educational environment is without doubt the construction of a curriculum. This requirement becomes mandatory when the educational environment happens to be one where the teacher and the taught or, more appropriately the student and the system interact at the personal level only occasionally and teaching and learning is done at a distance. How often have we heard from the students following a distance education course questions like: Where does this course take me? How does it fit with the other courses I have done or intend to do? What relevance has the contents of the course to my daily life? What relevance has it in anybody's daily life?

Programmes or courses are good only as long as they address themselves to the needs of the learners. Unfortunately, in most educational systems, these needs are often the very last consideration in the planning cycle i.e if there is a planning cycle at all. The exceptions to this rule, at least, in Asia, seem to be one or two "OPEN UNIVERSITIES" that operate along the lines of the British Open University with full fledged course teams

that include designers of curricula. The other numerous smaller providers of open or distance learning either lack the necessary manpower, do not care or do not realise the androgogic impediments of teaching adults outside the classroom. The net result is very often poorly planned and delivered courses and worse still programmes. Ms. Jenkins later this morning will go through some of the processes that are the bare essentials in any kind of training programme for course developers, curriculum designers or instructional designers. These three terms are often used synonymously in most distance teaching systems. Therefore I shall not attempt to differentiate them either. I shall also limit my part of the discussion to what I see as issues in course development for which training is needed. These are by no means comprehensive and I am sure that as we progress through the week, we shall be adding others to this list.

Planning Teaching ?

I come from a conventional university - a small one at that. Our main clients are regular full-time classroom bound students who have access to lecture halls, lecturers, laboratories, libraries, counsellors and a never ending supply of peers. In such a system all of us are expected to understand what has to be taught, for how many hours and how it should be evaluated. In this climate curriculum is never spelled out. A course is normally described by a single phrase, or at best, by an assemblage of phrases with pages of bibliographic references. Like any other citadel of

higher learning our aim is to "make students think". This means, in the minds of the faculty, "making students understand" and "develop intellectual skills". These are achieved in one of two ways, through lectures and by demonstrations. To achieve "understanding" we deliver the same message in several different ways (redundancy) and cap it by discussion either initiated by the academic in small group tutorial sessions or initiated by the students themselves wherever or whenever the need arises. The fact that lectures play an insignificant part in the learning process either escapes all of the actors in this play or are deliberately ignored. Where the recipients of knowledge were expected to learn, where their entrance into the portals of academia tightly controlled, and where the time they will spend in each carefully demarcated discipline stringently administered this system of delivering education has worked very well. I am sure it will continue to do so.

However when my conventional university decided for various reasons to embark on a scheme to "educate" a broader section of the community who were interested to learn, who did not have the time or facilities for the valid and redundant forms of learning within campus walls and who did not possess the same prerequisite knowledge and whose interests are wider and experiences richer, the traditional methods of planning and delivering our teaching suffered some severe shocks in the form of failures, drop outs and other innumerable teaching/learning difficulties. Our experiences are not too dissimilar from those of others in the

region. These difficulties stem from the fact that delivering education to home based, part time learners is a new teaching trick which had to be learned and needed to be planned. This academic programme planning and the planning of specific courses required skills we did not quite possess. Today, we are still a long way from having an adequate supply of people with these skills.

The Skills

In 1980, Kevin Smith listed some of the stages involved in the planning of a distance education programme. They have not changed:

- * An analysis of needs - not of the system but of the clients
- * Clear definitions of the goals and objectives of the programme
- * Clear pathways of the various components (courses) towards achieving programme goals
- * Identification of the alternative ways of meeting these needs
- * An analysis of the resources required to meet the pedagogic objectives
- * Development of the instructional materials
- * Testing - Formative evaluation
- * Summative evaluation
- * Delivery and maintenance systems.

To set up a distance education system which recognises the above stages require skills that are not abundantly available in this

region.

At my university, it became very clear to us when we started to take a serious look at the way programmes were selected and courses identified that there was only one method of doing it. It is called **intuition** (Smith, 1980). By intuition the university knew what kinds of degree lines were needed by the country. By intuition departments knew what kinds of courses can make up each a degree and by intuition course writers knew what kinds of content was needed to create the courses. I am sure this is a familiar story to all of us. It is not easy to break this pattern of thinking. Course writers and unfortunately in many small systems the course writer continues to dominate the entire course development process, and they are reluctant to go beyond the content and structure of their particular courses. This situation is further exacerbated when off campus departments are filled with neither content specialists nor instructional specialists. The only way this system of developing courses can be changed is to institute a detailed planning cycle.

The Nature of Distance Education

The processes of designing programmes, curricula and instruction in both **conventional** and **open university** systems are not entirely different. In both systems it is necessary to have some conception of the goals that are being aimed at. It is these objectives that become the criteria by which materials are

selected and created, content outlined, instructional procedures developed and evaluations instituted. However there are some differences. In 1980, Desmond Keegan highlighted some of these and it is not misplaced in this audience to reiterate these differences before examining the key concepts to be included in in a curriculum planning training programme for distance educators. These differences are:

- * In traditional institutions a teacher teaches. In distance education an institution teaches,
- * In traditional situations "intersubjectivity" is central to the teaching/learning activity. In distance education this is missing - once the learning materials has been developed and dispatched to students there is no control or little control of the teaching process,
- * Traditional systems are very personalised while a distance education system can easily become depersonalised and curriculum planners need to expect the worst scenarios,
- * In conventional systems the student receives a multitude of support during his learning; students in the distance teaching systems have to be independent.

The Issues

Given the above nature of distance education curriculum planning inevitably has to take into consideration a number of issues. Some of these I list below for your consideration:

- * **What educational purposes should the programme seek to attain?**

This may include raising issues like the characterisation of the learners, the learning environment, the educational objectives of the disciplines, the philosophical basis of selecting objectives, the methods of stating objectives which in the form which would be helpful in selecting the learning experience.

*** How can learning experience be selected ?**

This may include an exposition of the general principles of selecting learning experiences and perhaps ways and means of characterising those experiences that will be useful in attaining the various types of objectives.

*** How can learning experience be organised for effective instruction?**

Here perhaps we need to know the meaning of organizer, the criteria for effective organization, the elements that have to be organized, the principles of organization, the organizing structure as well the process of planning an organizer.

*** How can the effectiveness of the learning experience be evaluated?**

The need for evaluation is often missed by some big but certainly almost all of the small open learning systems. Again the problem seems to lie in the inability of people involved in the programmes to institute simple and even dirty evaluation strategies. In this context exposure to some basic notions of evaluation, simple procedures, tools for analysing and reporting (meaningfully) the findings of evaluation exercises would be useful.

Conclusion

The above are but a few items that I see as basic items in any training activity to be organised for curriculum and programme planners of distance education systems. The list is essentially a reflection of my experience after having gone through a number of training exercises. It must be remembered that many of us, especially those from conventional universities, who had been

entrusted with planning small distance education systems are non-professional educators. Therefore our starting point in planning exercises is level 0. If trainers accept this reality than training not only becomes comprehensible it but also becomes relevant to the needs of those who have to do the job finally.

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