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Programme Planning And Curriculum Development

By

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WORKSHOP ON TRAINING IN MEDIA
FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION IN ASIA
June 1987
AMIC
Singapore
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Training distance educators to plan courses

It is easier and more effective to demonstrate training than to write about it. This paper tries to give an idea of the kind of training suitable for those who plan courses, but, in the best tradition of distance education, it does not stand alone. It needs to be considered together with demonstrations and examples of training techniques and materials, and it needs to be balanced with an expression of needs from those institutions with staff to be trained. The seminar presentation will include these features.

The International Extension College and its experience of training

The suggestions presented in this paper are based on experience gained working with the International Extension College (IEC), which has been training distance educators for about 15 years. It may be helpful to describe how we became involved in training, what courses we offer, and our training philosophy.

IEC is a non-profit organisation, registered as a charity under English law. It was established in 1971 in response to requests for assistance and information about distance teaching from third world countries. It provides help in five main ways:

by assisting governments and institutions to start distance teaching;

by providing consultancy on distance teaching;

by conducting research, producing publications and organising conferences;

by providing information;

by conducting training for people working or planning to work in distance teaching.

In the early seventies we helped to set up the Mauritius College of the Air, the Botswana Extension College (now the Department of Non-Formal Education), the Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre and the Correspondence and Open Studies Unit, University of Lagos (now the Correspondence and Open Studies Institute). It immediately became clear that the staff of these new institutions needed training, and our first training exercise, a workshop for writers at the Mauritius College of the Air, took place in 1972, barely a year after our foundation. Shortly afterwards, we were invited to run a workshop for future course writers at what was then the Haile Selassie University in Ethiopia, and from that time on have been regularly involved with training workshops both for institutions which we are helping to establish and on a consultancy basis to others who hear about our work. My own first assignment for IEC, as a consultant before I joined the full-time staff, was at a writers' training workshop in Nigeria in 1975. This type of short, specific training course is now more important than ever, with the rapid recent growth of distance teaching.
IEC quickly began to develop training materials for distance teaching. Our first venture was a correspondence course with printed lessons and audio tapes for correspondence course writers. This ran for a few years from the early seventies, and is now replaced by a range of training manuals, which cover most aspects of distance education. We are now planning to introduce a Diploma in Distance Education, taught partly at a distance.

This last idea has developed from our third kind of training activity, general face-to-face courses in distance teaching which we run in association with the Department of International and Comparative Education of the University of London Institute of Education. Our main course, currently in its eleventh year, is a four-month practical course in all aspects of distance teaching. Course participants since 1977 now total 217 from over 40 countries. We also teach an option in distance education in the Institute's regular Masters' course in Educational Planning and Development for Developing Countries. As a result of demand for further training from short-course participants, we are currently negotiating with the University to launch an External Diploma in Distance Education which will be studied at a distance and will initially be open to all those who have completed the short course. We hope later to be able to offer a Masters' course on the same basis.

Training is thus a major part of IEC's work. We try to provide training that responds to the needs of institutions and their staff. We bring to our training activities a firm philosophy. First, we see distance education as a system and, while we plan training programmes to cover basic skills needed for different jobs, whether concerned with administration, materials development, tuition or counselling, we believe that all those involved in distance education need to acquire a general understanding of the potential and methods of the system as a whole. Second, we believe that people learn by doing, so that as far as possible we make training practical through simulations or working on real projects. Third - and this is a consequence of working on real projects rather than simulations - we shape training programmes to the needs of institutions and their staff. Fourth, we feel that the sharing of experiences is an important component in training and in order to generate this we put considerable emphasis on the presentation and analysis of case studies of participant's own experiences. Finally, we aim to help institutions towards providing their own training; thus, we prefer to work alongside local trainee trainers in workshops, and are ready to help institutions to develop their own training materials.

Training needs in course development

In order to develop distance-teaching materials, people need to know how to plan courses, decide on media use, plan and develop texts and broadcast or recorded audio and video materials; they may have to commission authors, edit texts, produce programmes and coordinate development and production. The skills to perform these tasks will need to be acquired by a variety of staff: academics, writers, producers, managers, trainers. Some will be full-time in distance education, others part-time.
Training for all these cadres has a place both in new institutions and in older institutions when a new course is being developed. Training can consist of initial orientation and skills development, or upgrading the skills of existing staff through in-service training. It may be meant to provide a long-term foundation for permanent staff, or a brief functional training for people such as part-time writers on a short contract.

Each aspect of course development has its own training curriculum, and a number of these will be covered in forthcoming presentations. Course planning must precede the development of materials and thus training in planning is the first item on the training agenda.

The process of course planning

A distance course normally consists of teaching materials such as texts, broadcasts, audio cassettes and video programmes, together with a support system, such items as face-to-face sessions and correspondence tuition. Course planning is the process of converting an idea into a course outline which specifies how each of these teaching mechanisms is to be used. It includes deciding on a curriculum, planning media use and support systems, and organising the curriculum into a sequence of teaching segments.

Training for course planning is a difficult and neglected aspect of training for course development. A large part of the difficulty stems from the fact that the process of planning itself is fraught with difficulty. An outline is developed as a result of consultations with a number of people, such as subject experts, distance education experts, officials of relevant ministries or institutions. Usually a group of such people is convened which then meets regularly, probably over a period of months, until an outline is agreed. It is difficult to describe this process, as it has no firm shape.

Another difficulty derives from the fact that course planners often fail to recognise the important issues. Those new to distance education have little awareness of how a curriculum for distance education differs from a conventional syllabus in the same subject, approaching familiar topics from new angles. They will generally have some idea that a distance course uses several media, but will have little or no experience of planning to teach using several media, and will usually believe that the first step is to write the text, with audio and video materials following after. The assumption is often made that course planning simply means deciding what units to write. Often a poor understanding of distance education itself underlies such misconceptions.

The lack of recognition of such issues results in a failure to realise how much attention planning needs, either in practice or as an element in staff training. Too often, writers assemble for a training or production workshop believing that they have finished planning but all they have is a list of topic headings for units of text, taken from a syllabus. They have not even
started course planning, and have no conception of what is involved. Training thus needs to start earlier.

The training agenda

Training to plan courses needs to be a substantial element in the training of all course developers. In the IEC four-month course in distance teaching we include a production workshop in which everyone must take part in planning a course and developing some written and audio materials. Over the years, we have come to realise that we need to pay more attention to course planning, and we now spend as much time in the workshop on planning as on the techniques of writing.

What are the vital elements in such training? First, planners must understand the basic principles of distance education. The two ideas that courses have to be planned long in advance and that teaching takes place largely through media are both alien to those coming from conventional education, and misunderstandings about distance education may persist without good briefing.

Next, we must introduce the media of distance education - print, broadcasts, audio, video and face-to-face - discuss their strengths and weaknesses, and investigate the suitability of each medium for presenting different subject matter. The process of integrating media into a teaching system needs exploring and explaining.

The use of a systems approach for planning distance education is the next item on the agenda. This approach, widely used in distance education, provides a framework for moving systematically from an idea for a course right through to production and use. The approach includes a number of features that are relatively unfamiliar to those coming from conventional education. In particular, the concept of learner-centred education brings with it the question of assessing educational needs. The new distance educator has generally no experience of doing this and little understanding of why it is necessary. He or she will have only a hazy picture of the learners he is to plan for. He or she needs to know, first, the general characteristics of both adult learners and distance learners, and then the characteristics of the target audience for the courses to be planned. These characteristics will affect what is taught and the way it is presented.

Once these background issues have been covered, we can move on to the determination of course aims and objectives. The objectives give a general picture of the curriculum to be covered, and provide a framework for the detailed planning of course units. It helps if planners have some understanding of the main influences on the curriculum; for example, how national development priorities may need to be balanced against academic priorities in deciding the proportions of theory and practice in, say, an engineering course. We may note here that distance education institutions are often requested by governments to provide courses that are more functionally orientated than those offered by conventional institutions. Thus, objectives and curriculum may be different and new.
There are other issues to consider besides the subject. Distance education has an important hidden curriculum. The teaching materials have to replace the teacher in more than subject-matter alone. The texts must be designed in such a way that they provide a substitute for dialogue, and must also encourage students to develop their own personal study skills and abilities. This is not just a matter of writing style; materials have to be planned to stimulate the student to interact with tutor, text and other media. That is, course units should be activity-centred and based on problem solving rather than passive reading, listening or viewing.

Finally - and there has only been room here to sketch the minimum essentials for the agenda - there is the question of making a course outline. Once all the background investigations are complete and the aims and objectives clear, then a blueprint can be developed which specifies objectives, entry behaviours and requirements, unit titles, media use, study hours and assessment procedures. An exercise in developing a course outline thus forms the conclusion of training in course planning.

Some examples of training

It is a challenge to cover effectively such a wide range of topics in the time usually available for training. I provide below some examples of how IEC has tried to do this, and some illustrative resource material will be available during the presentation.

1. Simulation exercises

In our four-month course at the University of London Institute of Education we make use of the Institute's resource material on Mortadella, an imaginary country with a full educational and statistical profile. Mortadella provides scope for all kinds of educational planning exercises, and in the production workshop, we ask our students to plan and develop distance-teaching courses for a range of different target groups in Mortadella. We take four or five ideas for courses and divide the students into working groups to consider these ideas. We supply each group with a briefing document and some resource materials, and over a period of twenty days guide them through course planning and the development of sample materials. In this, as in all training, we make use of our training manuals (which are now on display). The first part of the workshop - five days - is devoted to course planning, with the remaining 15 days devoted to writing, recording, editing and presenting sample materials.

2. Real courses: phased production workshops

Many new institutions are faced with the need to train staff and produce materials simultaneously. To meet such needs, we have helped to run production workshops, where the actual development of materials takes first place, with training going on incidentally in the
background. In our work with refugees, such as in the Sudan Extension Unit and South African Extension Unit, we have developed a strategy of phased workshops to provide on-the-job training. The first stage is a curriculum planning workshop, where potential course developers gather for about five days to plan courses and develop outlines. The second stage consists of workshops to help writers to develop skills and start writing and audio workshops to develop cassette materials, with a third stage concerned with editing materials. As this pattern developed, we became aware of how useful and satisfactory it was to give such prominence to the planning phase.

3. In-Service training in course development

In in-service training, we concentrate on building on experience, using real projects rather than simulations. In a forthcoming four-week course for practitioners from Indian state ministries of education, to take place at the Central Institute of Educational Technology, we have asked each participant to come with a syllabus to write to. We shall spend the first week of the workshop helping them to develop a course outline, and then for the remaining three weeks they will develop a sample multi-media unit of a real course. We shall expect participants to start with considerable expertise and build rapidly on their own experience and that of their fellows.

4. Orientation: the case study approach

The most effective training is through practice, whether simulation or real production. Sometimes however staff need a rapid general orientation course, and time is too short for much practical work. In such circumstances, case study material can provide a useful stimulus for discussion. I recently led a one-week orientation seminar for the academic staff of the Indira Gandhi National Open University, where we spent two days on general orientation and course planning, and the rest of the week on materials development. In our discussions of discuss planning we were able to examine and comment on existing IGNOU course outlines in subjects related to each participant's own specialism. Even though many of these outlines were still in a rudimentary draft form, they were useful case-study material and drew attention to key issues in course planning. Thus course participants gained some initial ideas which will need to be followed up with fuller training.

5. Awareness-raising for existing staff

Frequently, distance education practitioners comment that government officials, politicians and other policy makers also need training in distance teaching and its implications. We have recently been involved in an
implications. We have recently been involved in an interesting initiative which is aimed at one such group, donors. The World Bank asked us to develop for them a video-based training pack for its own staff, to alert them to the potential of media for encouraging development. The result is a wide-ranging pack, *Mobilising Messages*, which explains and illustrates a variety of uses of media, addressing the question of when and how to use media, when planning an educational project. The pack is on display at the seminar.

Conclusion

I have argued that training in course planning should be an important element in staff development. Although I have described a number of training approaches, I believe we still need a greater range of teaching materials and ideas. But the most important step forward will be if planning is given greater priority as a training issue. Poor quality course materials are often the result of poor planning. Sufficient opportunities for training, early enough in course development, will make a significant difference.

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May 1987