Distance Learning Program in Population Issues (DLPI): Opportunities for Continuing Education

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Abstract—Distance Learning in Population Issues (DLPI) is a distance education program offered by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in collaboration with Central American Population Center of University of Costa Rica (CCP-UCR) and Mauritius Institute of Health (MHI) of the Mauritius Ministry of Health & Quality of Life.

The program consists of 7 courses on population and health; participants receive materials and tutoring over the Internet (email and other means of communication, 40 hours of participation). Tutoring can be in English, Spanish or French, according to preference of participants. Since 2005, external partners and UNFPA are collaborating in this program. Program administration is located in Central America, management at UNFPA headquarters and tutoring at both Central America and Africa. Participants register online from many countries worldwide, registration from 104 countries were received last year.

The program is offered in 8-week periods for 7 courses and organized in 4-5 yearly terms. Each course is either tutored by an English-French spoken tutor or by an English-Spanish tutor.

Results show a mean completion rate of 61.3 ± 7 with a median of 61.2 in 2005-2011. Participants evaluate course tutoring and administration after it finishes. Evaluation results are anonymous and participants comments are submitted to each tutor in order to know what worked well and what did not in the course.

DLPI is an ongoing experience of inter institutional collaboration between an international cooperation institution (UNFPA) and external partners (higher education and health public institutions) which contributes to continued education of workers.

Index Terms—Distance Education, Distance Learning, Training Support, Capacity Building.

I. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: GENERATIONS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION.

A. Components of all distance learning systems

UNESCO describes the components of distance learning systems: They refer to the mission of the system; course contents or curricula; teaching strategies; learning materials and resources; communication strategies; management and administration and last but not least evaluation procedures (UNESCO, 2002).

In general, any reference to mission, from UNESCO’s perspective points it as the component which defines its role in the context of national policy. The mission may be directed towards particular purposes, target groups, regions, sectors or levels of education and training, and driven by particular values and philosophies of learning and education.

From its perspective, courses and curricula define the profile of a system or institution. They should be related to the mission and to defined needs or markets. Any distance education system should provide courses similar to those provided by conventional institutions and they are subject to similar regulations as regards content, admission and assessment. Teaching strategies and techniques depend partly on the type of program and the needs they are designed to meet, but they also depend on the educational philosophy and values of the particular system, and the educational characteristics and potential of the technologies used. A connection between teaching strategies, economy and the choice of technology might be distinguishable.

In addition, learning materials and resources are essential components in all distance learning systems. Comprehensive, well designed materials may stimulate self-directed learning and thus influence the quality of the system as a whole. Design, development and production of materials might be considered as a sub-system in distance teaching organizations. Previously produced, existing materials, text-books, software etc. may be used but in most cases each program benefits from having specifically designed learning materials. By the same token, communication between teachers and learners is a necessary and basic component in distance education, as in all other forms of education. Communication technologies distribute messages in text, still and moving images, and sound. Knowledge-generating messages may be communicated to large numbers of learners, either synchronously or asynchronously, broadcasted or accessed on demand through audio/video players or...
Communication serves two purposes. The first is the distribution of information. Course materials can be delivered through distribution of pre-packaged material and/or transmission of synchronous or broadcast programs, lectures, audio or video materials.

Another statement refers to the crucial component of all education which is the interaction between teachers and learners, and, where possible, between learners also. In some forms of distance education this learner-learner interaction is practically non-existent, but in most cases it is considered important and may be provided in different ways. As such, the emphasis is very much on the content and conversational character of the written pre-produced course package. Holmberg (1989) does acknowledge that regardless of how conversational the pre-produced course is, “communication between the student and the distance tutor has essential tasks”. However, real conversation with the tutor is, by economic necessity, supplementary to the pre-produced course. In addition, to Holmberg argues, “Guided directed conversation” is a characteristic of distance education. In essence, his theory posits distance education as “friendly conversation [fostered by] well-developed self-instructional materials [resulting in] feelings of personal relation ... intellectual pleasure [and] study motivation”. It is the responsibility of course developers to create this simulated conversation through well-written materials. Although conversation was the defining characteristic in Holmberg’s theory of distance education, this theory was directed to the pre-produced course package and clearly within the industrial paradigm (Garrison, 2000).

Students might meet together physically in groups, or sometimes connect to the group with other forms of external support. New technologies allow the organization of virtual groups, and in countries where access to the Internet is common, this is the fastest growing approach to distance education (UNESCO, 2002).

Local support might contribute to the system by providing means for communication process. Its might be through a letter, a telephone call or an e-mail message; any of them are more likely to be the means of learner support in many institutions. What is meant here is, however, support in a form that allows some kind of direct (face-to-face) interaction between the learner and a teacher or a mentor/facilitator. This component may be organized completely as face-to-face events, or in combination with communication at a distance (teleconferences etc.). Local support is usually given in a study center or resource center. The center may also offer access to other learning resources or equipment.

An administrative support – student and staff management sub-system- comprises admission, allocation to courses and student services, administering the learning and teaching procedures, assignments and assessment, monitoring drop-out and completion, and examinations. Staff may be hired on a part-time basis or may be in the core faculty in the case of a dual mode institution, but in either case they have to be recruited, trained and monitored. A range of other experts with different qualifications is also needed, either as full-time staff or as external consultants: planners, instructional designers, developers and producers, researchers, media experts, marketing experts and administrative staff.

Effective management and administration needs not only competent staff, but also well designed, efficient administrative systems and routines, planning and monitoring systems, budgetary and accounting systems. Many of these will be quite different from the corresponding systems needed in the management of other forms of education.

The requirements of housing and equipment may also be very different from conventional education institutions. A single mode distance learning system has no residential students, and thus there is little need for classrooms, lecture theatres etc. at the central location. Such facilities may be needed locally, and are often provided in cooperation with local institutions. At the central location there will be need for production facilities and storage capacity, although some decentralized production is also possible. In a dual mode institution these distance education facilities have to be accommodated alongside the space dedicated to the institutions’ primary mission.

Finally, evaluation should be a component, in order to provide information relevant to the adjustment of the roles and operation of system components, and in order to secure their optimal contribution and development. The success of any distance education institution, dual or single mode, is highly dependent on the efficiency and effectiveness of the monitoring and evaluation system, without which it may be impossible for administrators to be aware of problems in the system until the system itself breaks down. It is not possible to rely upon the kind of informal, unstructured feedback that may be sufficient in the conventional classroom.

B. Background of DLPI as a distance education system.

Distance Learning in Population Issues (DLPI) is offered by Department of Human Resources of the Learning and Career Management Brand (DHR/LCMB) to all staff members in UN offices across five geographical regions (www.unfpa.org). Its objective is to enable them to implement UNFPA’s programs according to UNFPA strategy and best practices (UNFPA, 2009).

This program was originally developed through a joint effort of UNFPA and United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC). In 2002 it was transferred fully to UNFPA and six courses in population issues were developed by theme experts.

The six initial courses were:
Course 1: The “What and Why” of Reproductive Health
Course 2: Confronting HIV/AIDS: Making a Difference
Course 3: Gender Mainstreaming: Taking Action
Getting Results
In 2011, course 7 was added, its name is “ICPD and Humanitarian Action: Emergency Preparedness, Response and Recovery” and Proyecto Kalu did introduce tutoring in English-Spanish and English-French for course 7.

In the period 2005-2011, 1794 participants of 7284 (61.2%) completed at least one course. In addition, 286 participants did receive their corresponding Certificate of Achievement. Some UNFPA staff members used it to get admission in post graduate university programs.

Course or program completion has long attracted great interest and some controversy, it might be expressed in positive terms (e.g. retention) or negative ones (e.g. attrition). There is no consensus around the rate of completion rate results in distance education. First generation -correspondence courses- and independent study modules have had historically high non completion rates, sometimes as low as 10% (Kasworm, 2010). Even courses offered by the Internet can have similar completion rates to older form of print-based instruction. Surveys of existing distance university programs in the developing world have shown that successful completion rates for degree courses are often as little as 10 to 34 percent compared with the rates of 55 to 66 percent in conventional universities (Knebel, 2001) There are mixed findings about course completion rates for distance and traditional learners but withdrawal rates were higher for distance learners (21%) when compared to traditional learners (19%) (Moore, 2006).

C. Learning Method

The Distance Learning Program aims to give each participant what he /she needs to master the comprehensive information provided in the courses, to help he /she how to relate it to specific own experiences, and enable he /she to assess his /her progress. It provides participants with several learning tools. They are: Course workbooks, with examples and case studies drawn from all regions, as well as self-assessment questions (SAQs) and glossaries of important terms.

Course materials contain clearly defined aims and objectives for each learning module. The written material is structured so participants’ can work through it at his /her own speed and at times when it is convenient. Nonetheless, the tutor will provide some form of learning milestone and there are strict deadlines that he /she will need to observe.

Exercises will help participants to relate course material to its own experiences. Additional resources and reference material posted on the course web pages or provided by tutors.

Specific assignments for feedback and grading by tutor. When available and if connectivity is working properly, a discussion board is available to enhance interaction among learners.

Learning primarily comes from self-study of the reading materials. Tutor will get in touch with each participant at the very start of the term. Communication
between participants and tutor occurs mainly by e-mail. He/she answers participants’ questions and guides him /her through the materials and asks for assistance. Participants are able to contact his /her tutor whenever they need help or advice.

D. DLPI management

LCMB at UNFPA headquarters manages the program. The yearly planning and programming of terms is agreed with external collaborators by means of several Long Term Agreements. Coordination continues while the term is ongoing and needed adjustments are done. Online registration using first-come first-served strategy is open until 40 spaces are full for each group. Groups open with minimum registrants.

Course participation is included in UNFPA’s highly regarded Performance Appraisal and Development process, known as the PAD, built on the competency framework. UNFPA’s PAD system has been acquired by several other United Nations agencies and organizations, which are adapting this process and its underlying competency framework to improve performance (UNFPA, 2010).

All program data concerning registrants, participants and completions was carried using worksheets from 2005 to 2010. In 2011, UNFPA began a learning management system (LMS) for all program statistics.

After each term, LCMB receives a consolidated report about program statistics for each course. LCMB is responsible of overall monitoring and evaluation of the program, training administration services and tutoring services (UNFPA, 2009).

E. DLPI administration

CCP-UCR administers the program since 2005. Administration tasks comply course and tutor assignation, course confirmation to each individual participant, problem solving related to either course materials, course assignation, communication barriers, system failures, as well as any unforeseen events in course process. Communication with both participants and tutors is expected to be done as frequently as needed.

During the term, program administrator provides tutors team with the so called DLPI tutoring tips which are brief ideas or resources to improve tutoring and its results.

Program administrator also monitors course process and receives tutors’ end report. He /she consolidate results for the term in an administrative report sent timely to LCMB. Then the next term is ready to begin, repeating the process 4 to 5 times per year.

Administrator also prepares and submits course evaluation for each course; it is done at the end of the term. Evaluation is performed using electronic forms sent to all participants, including those who did dropout or who did not complete successfully. Anonymous evaluation results are sent to each tutor for his /her info and action.

Electronic certificates of completion are sent to all participants who complete the course. A batch of Certificates of achievement are sent to UNFPA headquarters and then to each UNFPA country office.

Program administrator is expected to offer and maintain a technical learning platform that could be used for all courses; it would be open to participating tutors. He /she is expected to put up technical ability to offer social networking functionality to participants and tutor (UNFPA, 2009).

F. DLPI tutoring

The model combines print-based self-study materials with distance tutoring. Tutoring can be in English, Spanish or French, according to participants’ preference. It is performed by specialized course tutors who facilitate participants’ learning by:

i. Guiding participants through the course content, methodology and requirements;

ii. Answering questions from participants and, if deemed necessary, expanding on concepts through additional insight and materials;

iii. Assessing individual participant’s learning progress and providing remedial help to participants with difficulties;

iv. Initiating and following up with the completion of (standard) assignments, rating the answers and providing helpful feedback (UNFPA, 2009).

Each tutor has a group of participants assigned to him /her; communication should begin with his /her welcome note the same day of the beginning of the course. The welcome note is a friendly message, sharing with the group, the tutors’ background and experience.

Participants come back to tutor and the group with their personal and professional background. Tutor suggests a schedule for reading and assignment submission and remarks the openness to answer participant’s questions, doubts and needs for successful completion of learning objectives.

At the end of the term he /she reports individual’s final condition, either complete, incomplete, fail or dropout. Tutors carry a heavy responsibility to help participants by making sure they understand their needs, help to overcome difficulties during the course and evaluate learning.

G. DLPI evaluation of learning

Tutors perform learning evaluation of participants. Assignment revision and feedback is by most the successful completion criteria. To complete each course tutors shall communicate with participants and send their comments and feedback to each assignment in a simple and straightforward way. The so called tutors’ end report include participants’ learning objectives and if they were met or not. Completion is awarded if participants submit
both assignments and fulfill successfully at least 50% of tutors’ comments and suggestions.

Usually tutors include comments about ongoing events in the process. For example, one course 2 tutor stated this problem “It was not easy for all the participants to respect the deadlines but they were given some additional time and were encouraged to submit their assignments”. Other tutor, course 6, reported “There were no major inconveniences, only some problems with the email (some works sent to the junk box)”.

On the contrary, another course 2 tutor refers his/her experience “As usual I enjoyed interacting with the participants from different countries and sharing their experience”. Course 4 tutor added “This is a studious and enthusiastic group; and it was a pleasure to serve as their Tutor. The Participants worked on topics emanating from their Country Programs that they were either working on or were planning to embark upon after the Course”.

H. DLPI Monitoring & Evaluation

After each course, UNFPA asks participants for feedback on the course materials, tutoring, and administration. Also, each tutor is asked to send in a short summary report including recommendations for improvement. Any findings relevant to training administration are shared and discussed with the organization charged with training administration, which in turn provides a regular report after each program cycle on challenges encountered, how they were overcome and which improvements are recommended (UNFPA, 2009).

For example, in 2010, 69% participants answered “The tutor knew her/his subject” and 62% answered “The tutor was responsive and gave good advice”. For the administrative service 55% agreed to the statement “I received timely and helpful responses to my questions”. The following excerpts from the learners’ evaluation comments exemplify their opinions regarding the program and why it worked well:

“For enhancement of knowledge and skills through guided self paced learning, this is very useful course for working professional. The course is direly related with UNPA’s mandate and priority”. Course 3 participant.

“I immediately used it for the DLPI 3 and foresee to give technical support to national counterparts”. Course 3 participant.

“The course was very helpful for me to design the advocacy program jointly with other stakeholders especially for leveraging the resources for ICPD agenda through local governance” Course 4 participant.

II. IMPLICATIONS AND PERSPECTIVE

This experience show how collaboration between an international organization and institutions devoted to academic and research activities contributes to continued education of workers. This distance learning program gives the greatest possible control over the time, place and pace of education to middle management staff working for UN agencies responsible for important development programs and projects. They have to supervise staff, travel locally and to other countries, and participate in planning and program evaluation. These responsibilities leave limited time for readings, reflections and assignment preparation.

Nowadays, in 2012, the opportunity is open to continue program administration and tutoring by the same providers or it could be awarded to other external partners. In perspective, DLPI collaboration between UNFPA and external partners will allow to continue this cross-cultural initiative with the contribution of academic and research for at least four additional years. As in previous periods, this kind of collaboration will allow to include needed adjustments in the future.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author thanks Markus Voelker of LCMB, UNFPA and Arodys Robles, director of Central American Population Center.

REFERENCES


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Carmen Marin is researcher at Central American Population Center of University of Costa Rica and administrator of the Distance Learning in Population Issues. This extension activity is registered in Vicercitoria de Accion Social (ED-1707) and is provided to UNFPA as a service by contract under a Long Term Agreement. San Jose, Costa Rica (e-mail: cmarin@ccp.ucr.ac.cr).

Manuscript received 23 April 2012.

Published as submitted by the author(s).