

Curriculum Design For Distance Learning: issues and possibilities

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Background

In the current context of widening participation in higher education, distance learning remains a useful means for enabling flexible access to study. This paper explores the issues raised by and potential uses of distance learning. As a practical example, it focuses on the Early Childhood Studies (ECS) degree course at London Metropolitan University. This is a part-time modular degree delivered as a taught course and via distance learning (which has been in place since 1994). Students can opt to study in both modes.

Students recruited onto the ECS degree require no formal qualifications; all that is required is that they have three year's experience of work with young children. In effect, this means that the profile of students on the degree course is extremely varied, ranging from those with first degrees in other subjects to students who have no formal academic qualifications at all. The range of ability is enormous, with some students requiring considerable initial support with basic skills, whilst others are comfortable with the conventions and expectations of academic discourse.

Distance-learning modules in ECS are delivered via module handbooks, (approximately 30,000 words in length) divided into ten chapters. The handbooks set out the topic in detail and direct the student towards relevant reading, with a range of reflective tasks within each chapter to facilitate engagement with the content. Learning outcomes and module aims are clearly laid out, as are the assessment requirements. The module handbooks are sent to students at the beginning of each term. They are printed and bound, normally comprising pages of fairly dense text with few diagrams and no illustrations. There is also a course video, but this is only for preliminary-level students.

Distance-learning students are allocated to a distance-learning tutor. Support offered by tutors can vary in its nature and frequency. Contact is maintained by phone and email. Students will study one or two modules a term (ECS does not follow semesters). For the first time, in 2003 a conference was held for distance-learning students to enable them to meet each other, discuss issues of concern and also hear expert speakers. Approximately one hundred of the two hundred and fifty distance-learning students attended. The conference was deemed to be a success and, according to the post conference evaluations, meeting tutors and the expert speaker were rated as the most valuable experiences.

Many of the module handbooks have been re-written at least once since their introduction. The need to redesign one of the preliminary level modules ("Aspects of Health Education"), in order to ensure that the content was up-to-date and covered relevant issues, promoted this investigation of curriculum design in the area of distance learning.

Nature, benefits and disadvantages of distance learning

A scan of the available literature reveals that distance learning is often written about alongside open and flexible learning as a way of enabling students to move away from conventional models of higher education. Race (1999:23) notes that *'choice and control'* are defining features of these types of learning. This can be control over pace, place, time and processes of study. In addition, Rowntree (1990: 11) notes that self-instruction is a key characteristic of distance learning which *'is characterised by using specially designed materials to help the learner learn alone'*.

This notion of flexibility is important for the student body undertaking the ECS course, many of whom are working full-time often with a range of family commitments as well. However, flexible learning also has its disadvantages for students learning alone; especially those less familiar with the academic requirements of analysis, critical reflection and synthesis. Therefore distance learning materials must not only aim to impart content but also to facilitate academic skills.

It is interesting to note that the notion of distance learning is not uncontested. Simpson (2002:186) poses the following questions about open and distance learning (ODL):

'Is distance learning an inferior substitute for conventional education or a unique mode of education in its own right? Are there things that cannot be taught by ODL? Is the quality of the educational discourse inherently poorer in ODL than other modes?'

On the other hand, Toohey (1999:129) goes on to cite the disadvantages of distance learning as

'expensive for students but cheaply produced...with little or no opportunity for engaging in questioning, discussion or challenging projects. Courses like this lack most of the opportunities for intellectual development which we would like to think characterise higher education'.

However, in relation to effectiveness, Toohey (*ibid.*) also notes that the printed word is as effective as a lecture. Therefore it would appear that the elements of debate, discussion and questioning in direct teaching are important to attempt to reproduce, as far as possible, in distance learning materials. This view is supported by Race (1990:11) who writes that distance learning materials must do what a teacher would do, that is *'guiding, motivating, intriguing, expounding, explaining, provoking, reminding, asking questions, discussing alternative answers, appraising each learners progress, giving appropriate remedial help or enrichment help... and so on.'*

Other principles set out by Race (1990:161) include the fact that learner activities should be varied and that the level of difficulty, type of activity and manner of recording response should also vary. It is also important to pay attention to the presentation of materials and so to ensure that flow diagrams, charts and other visual aids are used.

The potential, offered by newer technologies, of effective engagement with the student by the tutor is noted by Simpson (2002:51) who describes the basic potential elements of distance learning as being a *'multi-media operation'* with engagement via written media, phone, face to face communication, audiotape, video, computers, radio, television, and mixed media such as videophones and streaming video.

Reviewing the design of distance-learning courses

Toohey (1999:89) notes the importance of talking to current and recent graduates when planning to review a course – but also comments that end-of-session student evaluations can be too

general to be of use. She describes useful questions as asking about what is/was missing or should have been given greater emphasis.

A useful guide for reviewing the design and effectiveness of distance-learning programmes is the following checklist devised by Cox and Gibbs (1994: 27) as an evaluation agenda for a resource-based learning course:

- Do students manage their independent learning adequately (time, balance of assessment demands)?
- Are the resources adequate (right level of difficulty, access to texts etc)?
- Is contact with students adequate (are all students accessing time available)?
- How do students respond to the course design and to this way of learning?
- Is the assessment system adequate (sufficient time and understanding)?
- Are learning outcomes adequate?

With regard to course content and structure, Lawless (1994:57) points out that '[i]t is easy to assume that the structure of a course will be determined by the nature of its content, that there is a 'natural' or obvious order in which topics should be presented'. Hence, we need to consider whether or not the natural order of teaching a module, might be the obvious structure for a distance-learning course, the order of topics will need to be assessed in the light of pace and variation for the reader.

At the more detailed level of designing distance-learning materials, Rowntree (1990) proposes eight main tasks in order to write a good distance learning course:

- Analyse your main ideas
- Tell learners what they may learn to do
- Ensure learners have all pre-requisites
- Give examples and non-examples of the new idea
- Go from simple to complex, concrete to abstract
- Link new idea to learners' experience
- Get your learners to apply the idea
- Give learners feedback on their activity
- Give your learners practice with the idea

In terms of physical pointers, he suggests:

- Vary the layout
- Use diagrams and illustrations
- Change tone of voice (lightness of touch, humour and drama)
- Other voices.

To enable learners to negotiate the material, Rowntree (*ibid.*) recommends the use of access devices such as:

- Explanatory title
- Contents list
- Learning outcomes
- Aims and objectives.

Learner support

Lewis (1990: 5) writes that in planning new schemes that we 'think hard about the nature of the student body. Who are they? What are their main characteristics likely to be? In what context will they learn? How much time realistically will they have for study?'

Simpson (2002) notes that student support falls into two broad categories: academic and non-academic support. Academic support is of extreme importance for ECS students who require time to discuss the tensions of balancing family and work commitments, timetabling and so on. From experience, it is sometimes easier to provide non-academic support from a distance, on a one-to-one basis, than it is to provide academic support.

Given the nature of the ECS student body it is interesting to reflect on whether distance learning is always the best option. Is flexibility enough of an advantage to outweigh the benefits of direct teaching for students unfamiliar with academic expectations? Or should distance learning methods make the most of new technology and ensure that students can enjoy the flexibility of distance learning whilst ensuring the support they need is in place in a non-traditional form, for instance, through the use of telephone conferencing, bulletin boards and web-based discussions?

To help students to engage with materials that are not easily available, one possibility is to supplement the module handbook with a pack of course readings (for example, in the case of ECS, policy papers, briefings, articles from the press and chapters from relevant textbooks).

A virtual learning environment, such as WebCT, also appears to offer enormous potential to vary the delivery of materials to distance learning students, and so potentially improve learning. The same caveat about taking cognisance of the profile of the learners and their support needs again applies, before embracing WebCT or other new methods.

By way of illustration, the ECS student body (taught and distance learning) comprises 99% women, who are on average in the their 30s and 40s. For some of our students use of IT, even word processing, is something they learn as they join the ECS course. WebCT, if used to full effect, requires a level of technical competence that would need to be carefully addressed before introduction.

If these support needs were fully addressed and personnel were available within the department to support students and provide training, WebCT could be used to:

- create interactive course materials including video ;
- create discussion groups for the weekly tasks and discussion topics with potential for immediate exchange of ideas and views;
- support students to keep an interactive journal – with rapid comments and feedback from tutors.

The increasing need for interaction with teaching staff would also need to be factored in to any additional use of WebCT.

Another area of importance for distance-learning students is the workplace, which certainly plays a large part in the ECS course. Distance learners are isolated but use the workplace to collect data, practise skills, observe and critically reflect. This should be acknowledged and built, more consistently, into any course (re)design.

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