

# From the Pomeroon to Portland: The challenges of training teachers by distance in contrasting contexts in the English -speaking Caribbean.

**Zellynne Jennings, University of the West Indies**

## **Abstract**

This paper draws on experiences in training primary and secondary school teachers in two contrasting contexts in the English-speaking Caribbean. Its focus is on two programmes (i) the B. Ed in secondary education in Jamaica – a specially funded project to train some 3,000 teachers from upgraded high schools by distance and on-line over a 10 year period and (ii) a new initial teacher training programme delivered by the Cyril Potter College of Education in Guyana which uses a print based distance delivery mode .Drawing on a recent evaluation of the latter, the paper compares the challenges of training teachers in the vast remote underdeveloped areas of Guyana with those faced by teachers in Jamaica who are exposed to more sophisticated technology and physical and human resources. The main questions that this paper addresses centre around the extent to which these programmes have met the objectives of distance education, especially those pertaining to flexibility, expansion of educational opportunities and provision for quality education.

## **Introduction : Contrasting Contexts**

Guyana, ‘the land of many waters’, and Jamaica ‘land of wood and water’ , both former British colonies , are countries which have much in common and yet are different in many ways. Guyana is situated on the South American continent ,surrounded by Spanish, Dutch and Portuguese speaking neighbours, while Jamaica is an island in the Caribbean sea whose nearest Spanish speaking neighbour is Cuba. Table 1 gives a summary of its main differences which underscore that Guyana faces greater challenges than Jamaica in terms of its level of poverty, the variety of its ethnic groups , including an indigenous population scattered over a vast and difficult terrain for which it has to provide trained teachers.

Table 1: Some differences between Jamaica and Guyana

	<b>Yr Indep</b>	<b>Area (Sq.Km)</b>	<b>Pop.</b>	<b>Main Ethnic Groups (%)</b>	<b>Major Econ. Activity</b>	<b>Below Poverty Line(%)</b>
<b>Jamaica</b>	1962	10,991	2,758,000	91 Black 7.3 mixed	Tourism Bauxite	19.1
<b>Guyana</b>	1966	24,970	730,000	51 East Indian 38 African Guyanese 4.5 Amerindian	Sugar, Rice, Timber, Gold, Diamond mining	35

## **Aims of the Paper**

Distance Education has been described as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner (Perraton et al 1987. Its teaching/learning activities take place off campus and involve activities other than face-to-face interaction.

This paper seeks to compare the challenges of training teachers in the vast remote under

underdeveloped areas of Guyana with those faced by teachers in Jamaica who are exposed to more sophisticated technology and physical and human resources, with particular reference to the extent to which the use of the distance /on-line delivery mode has enabled

- greater *access* to training particularly by teachers who had hitherto been disadvantaged, for example by virtue of their geographical location in relation to training facilities.
- *Quality* of teacher training which is comparable to face to face delivery , with quality being looked at in terms of resource inputs, , relevance of the content of the print materials , as outcomes ( as measured by comparing performance of teachers trained using different delivery modes) and to some extent as processes.

## Sources of Data

The data sources are evaluations of distance education programmes conducted by the author on the Hinterland Teacher Training Project (HTTP) in Guyana (Jennings 1996), the evaluation of the Certificate programme by distance (CED/DE) delivered by the Cyril Potter College of Education (CPCE )in Guyana (Jennings 2005) and in Jamaica a comparison of the performance of students in a course delivered by the author face to face in the Certificate in Education fulltime (CED(F/T) and by distance (CED(UWIDITE))(Jennings 1999) and research on the B. Ed (Secondary ) by distance (B Ed Sec) .

For over 75 years the CPCE has been offering initial training for teachers at the Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary level and has implemented special programmes for training teachers from the hinterland. One example is the European Union funded HTTP Phase 1 in 1994 which trained 150 under qualified and untrained teachers in the hinterland regions using DE (print based). Another is the CIDA funded Trained Teachers' Certificate programme using DE. In August 2001 , 280 trainees from five of CPCE 's in-service centers located in regions 2,3,4,6 and 10 commenced the first Early Childhood and Primary teacher training DE programme. In July 2004 this pilot programme was completed and 64% of the trainees were successful. In fact the CED/DE was described as one of the most outstanding successes of the CIDA initiatives (Cowater International Inc. 2005 p 1-4).

Since 1961, the DES has offered the CED(F/T) in areas such as Education Management and Supervision and the teaching of subjects (e.g. Mathematics, Reading ,Teaching of Hearing Impaired (THI). The CED (UWIDITE) was first offered in the 1983/4 academic year in the THI and Teaching of Reading. It was governed by the same regulations as for the CED(F/T),except that whereas the latter lasted three terms, the CED(UWIDITE) lasted four terms and required candidates to be teaching full-time in a school in the area of specialization selected for study. A cohort of CED(UWIDITE) candidates who commenced studies in October 1983, completed in February 1985. This paper draws on data concerning this cohort.

On November 8 2001, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Culture (MOEYC) awarded a ten-year contract to the UWI to develop and implement a B.Ed degree delivered by distance to teachers in secondary high schools in Jamaica. The MOEYC funded the programme at no cost to the trainees. The expectation was that 3,000 teachers would be trained in five cohorts over this period in a range of subjects The first intake of students was January 2003. Initially the programme was print-based, with students being given course guides and a book of readings for each course. The distant -taught courses were delivered at the UWI Distance Education Centres (UWIDEC) across Jamaica, but the face to face courses were offered in the summer on the Mona campus. Over time , however, the

demands of the numerous courses on UWIDEC far outweighed the available physical and timetable space for tutorials and teleconference and so in the 2004/5 academic year, the decision was taken to move to asynchronous technologies (e.g. email discussion lists , audio /video recorded lectures). This enabled students to complete their programme without the need for attendance on campus except in the summer. .However, the course in the programme with which this paper is concerned- Issues and Perspectives in Education was delivered in the traditional distance mode using print materials, teleconference and face to face tutorials.

### Challenges in teacher training in Guyana and Jamaica

Table 2 contrasts the challenges faced by the distance programmes offered in both countries. It shows the regions and the resource centres to which the trainees in the CED/DE in Guyana were attached and a sample of the UWIDEC to which the trainees in the B.Ed Sec. in Jamaica are attached. It should be noted that when the CED(UWIDITE) was offered to the first cohort, it was delivered by teleconference from the Mona site to which students in other parts of the country had to travel. But this was no longer necessary once UWIDEC sites had been established in all the parishes in Jamaica.

Table 2 : Contexts for teacher training in Guyana and Jamaica

Country	Regions/RC/UWIDEC location	Challenges	RC	Library	Internet Access	Computer lab	Tel
<b>Guyana</b>	2 Anna Regina	Transportation costly in Pomeroun	Y	Y	N	N	Y
	3 Vreeden-Hoop	Transportation costly from islands in Essequibo	N	Y	N	N	N
	4 Georgetown	No Head of Centre Variable transportation costs	N	Y	N	N	Y
	6 New Amsterdam	High transportation cost	N	Y	N	N	Y
	10 Linden	Trainees relocated to town due to transportation costs	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
<b>Jamaica</b>	1 Mona	Transportation costs for students outside parish	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	2 Port Antonio	Inclement weather disrupts communication	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	3 Brown's Town	Difficulty with on-line registration	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	4 Sav-La-Mar	ditto	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	5 Mandeville	None	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

### Transportation Costs

As can be seen from table 2 the cost of transportation to get from their homes to the RCs

is a major challenge for trainee teachers in Guyana. For example, it can cost trainees as much as \$10,000.00 to get to Vreed-en-Hoop from the more far flung areas and even those with their own boats find fuel costs very expensive. These costs sometimes cause trainees to stay away from the tutorials. Because of the difficulty with transportation as well as cost, the policy in region 10 is to relocate trainees in the remote riverain areas to schools in or near Linden and they are housed in a hostel. Transportation costs are not such a deterrent in Jamaica except for those who do not live near site. Even so it does not pose the sort of challenges associated with Guyana. For example, in the case of the first *Hinterland Upgrading Programme* in 1985-86, although most of the teachers who did the programme were successful, the programme was discontinued because of the costliness of transportation. One of the centers for training was located in a part of the country which required students who lived in certain regions to go by air first to Georgetown and then by road and steamer to the area. This proved too costly to be sustainable.

### **Inadequacies in physical conditions and resource support**

Most of the Regions in Guyana do not have a separate Centre for the training programme. For example, the Vreed-En-Hoop Centre is located at the Vreed-En-Hoop Community High School which itself is in a very bad condition. The facilities are cramped, the books are stacked in a way that makes them inaccessible to the students and tutors. The classrooms used for the face to face sessions are often left dirty by the school children and the roof leaks. The Georgetown Centre is located on the CPCE campus where the pre-service programme is offered. There are no photocopying, computer or internet access or research facilities available at the Centre. And so students have to access such services at the CPCE pre-service facilities. The problem is that the library and copy shop are not open beyond 4.30.p.m the DE students have to be in classes from 4.00p.m. The trainees suffer from a sense of being treated like 'poor cousins' by their colleagues who do the CED full time at CPCE main campus.

Table 2 shows that the teachers in the programmes offered by the UWI, Jamaica, have far more advantages. The UWIDEC sites have computer labs and internet access enables the teachers to access resources from the Main Library of the UWI campus. The main challenges they face are transportation (in cases where students live far from a particular site), inclement weather affecting telephone communication, or technical difficulties in linking with the UWI on-line system for student registration.

### **Increasing Access**

There is no doubt that distance education has made it possible for more teachers to be trained in both countries. It has enabled access to teachers, such as those in the Pomeroun, who were unable to leave their families to go to the city for training. But there are times when unnecessary encumbrances result in persons being denied access. For example, there is the case of a teacher in a remote part of region 6 who would not have been able to attend tutorials every week and so was denied access as she would not have met the attendance requirement. This suggests the need for flexibility in the application of regulations governing such programmes.

In the case of Jamaica, DE has enabled the UWI to reach a larger audience spread over a wider geographical area at a much faster rate than traditional forms of delivery. For example, over a period of 22 years from the time that the CED(F/T) was first awarded (1962-1984), Dominica had 12 persons trained. On the UWIDITE system it had 11 persons trained in the first two cohorts of students alone (graduates of 1985 and 1986) (Jennings 1999). But providing access to an educational opportunity is one thing. Getting

the target group to take advantage of it is quite another.

With a projected five intake for training 3,000 students, it was expected that the B.EdSec would attract 600 students per intake. However, by the final intake less than one thousand trainees would have been admitted. A number of reasons account for this. A telephone survey of 23 schools in 2003 revealed that some 60% of them was unaware of the programme, despite use of the media for disseminating information about the programme. Information sent to the schools about the programme was not well displayed and principals themselves did little to encourage the teachers to apply. Off-shore universities also proved more attractive to some of the teachers. A major problem, however, was that a number of the teachers in the upgraded high schools were not qualified for entry into the B.EdSec. Many were trained to teach at the primary level, but were teaching in a secondary school. Others were trained to teach at the secondary level but were not teaching the subject that they were trained for and it was a requirement that to be admitted into the programme, the teacher had to be teaching the subject in which further training was being sought.

### **Quality and parity of programmes with different delivery modes**

One of the fears of DE students is that their programme would be of an inferior quality (e.g. in terms of content and tutors/lecturers) to that offered face to face. In the DE programmes examined in this paper, the content for the DE delivery was the same as for the face to face, but due to the late arrival of modules for the DE trainees in Guyana, they were put at a disadvantage compared with their face to face peers. When asked about the greatest difficulty they experienced in the programme most DE students highlighted the late arrival of modules. Delays in producing the modules led to courses being taught out of sequence. For example, the core content courses were not taught till the second year of the programme. Tutors had to do face to face sessions when the modules had not yet been developed and so trainees had nothing to read to prepare them for the sessions. As a result the trainees became dependent on the face to face sessions. While 40% of them felt these sessions were held frequently enough, 54% wanted more face to face sessions (Jennings 2005). And yet they had to do the same final examination paper as the face to face students. The exam paper was set by CPCE lecturers, with no input from the tutors.

There were also disadvantages in terms of teaching. Full time programmes are usually delivered by staff who are permanently employed to the institution and therefore have been subjected to more stringent assessment of their qualifications and experience. In the case of the CED/DE in Guyana, most of the tutors were retirees with over 20 years of experience in the education system, and while they were very dedicated, only about 50% of them had training in distance education. There were difficulties in recruiting staff with the knowledge and skills to write certain modules (e.g. in Personal and Professional Development) and to teach certain courses (e.g. Music). Spanish was squashed in a concentrated period of three weeks over one summer. For those doing the subject for the first time, this hardly gave any time for oral skills to be developed to any extent.

Most of the trainees (57%) felt that the content of the modules were not suitable for the hinterland areas. In one of the modules on Reading Across the Curriculum, for example, reference is made to 'what I see in the bedroom and planning a trip to the zoo'. While this may be appropriate for trainees in the city, it is hardly relevant to those who inhabit the rainforest and brave the dangers and joys of the wildlife everyday.

### **Student Performance**

In terms of performance, at the June 2004 sitting a total of 256 out of 281 actually took the

examinations. Of these a little over 65% passed. At the CPCE campus where the DE Certificate programme was delivered face to face, the performance of the primary trainees surpassed those who did the DE Certificate in the five in-service centers. However, the performance of ECE trainees in regions 2, 3 and 4 surpassed that of the trainees who did the programme face to face (Table 3). Noticeable in the final results were the strengths and weaknesses of the Regions. Regions 2 and 4 appeared strong in ECE, but weaker in Primary while the reverse was true in regions 6 and 10. This had to do with the training of the tutors in the particular area.

A comparison of the performance in the CED(F/T) and the CED(UWIDITE) over a ten year period showed that the performance of trainees in the former consistently surpassed that of the latter (Jennings 1999) but the performance of students who did the Issues and Perspectives in Education course in the B.EdSec surpassed that of the students who studied the course face to face. The difference in performance between the students in the different delivery modes was significant at the .05 level of confidence

Table 3 Performance of Trainees in Early Childhood Education by region

Table 4: performance of trainees in Issues and Perspectives in Education by DE

Teaching mode	N	Mean	SD
Face to face	60	55.3	7.97
Distance	85	58.2	8.43

## Conclusion

If the quality of a programme is assessed by its product, then the data presented in this paper suggests that DE programmes can produce graduates who are comparable in quality to the same programmes delivered face to face. It is interesting to note that the award for best performance in the 2001-2004 batch of the CED/DE was given to trainees in the distance programme. This is not to deny, however, that DE programmes face greater challenges than those delivered face to face, for example with regard to the quality of lecturers as well as their training for the DE mode and problems of access due to location. The teaching learning environment in the RCs in Guyana clearly needs to be improved and essential resources provided. They have a long way to go to become comparable to the UWIDEC in Jamaica.

What is also clear is that more realistic timelines need to be given for the development of materials for DE. This problem was most acute in Guyana, but preliminary feedback from an evaluation of the B.EdSec now underway suggests that inadequate time was given for the preparation for on-line delivery resulting in a poorer quality of course materials compared to those provided for synchronous delivery. The lower than expected intake into the BEdSEC raises questions concerning trainees perceptions of 'free' programmes as well as of cost effectiveness. Freeness in the teachers' minds may be associated with poorer quality, whereas if they have to pay they can demand an offering of a the highest quality. Furthermore, the question arises whether a programme with less than one third the expected intake would be worth the in excess of four hundred and sixty million dollars that the project costs. Future research would need to determine this.

But most evident too is that the size of a country, and its terrain, as well as the strength of its economy and the attitudes of the target groups impact on the quality of DE programmes and the extent to which they can meet their goals.

## References

Cowater International Inc. (2005) The Review and Evaluation of The Guyana Basic Education Teacher Training Project – GBET. Draft Report.

Jennings, Z (1996) Evaluation of the Hinterland Teacher Training Programme : A project of the government of Guyana –European Community Sector Programme for Education and Health , managed and implemented by CEMCO.

Jennings, Z (1999) ‘Innovation with hesitation: distance education in Commonwealth Caribbean Universities’ .*Journal of Education and Development in the Caribbean* Vol. 3, No., 2 :115-144.

Jennings, Z (2005) The review and evaluation of the certificate programme delivered by CPCE (August 2001-2004).Report to Tecsuit International Ltd, Canada.

Perraton, H.; Tsekoa, K. (1987). Distance Education in Small Nation States. In: Bacchus, K.; Brock, C. (eds.) *The Challenge of Scale: Educational Development in the Small States of the Commonwealth*. London, Commonwealth Secretariat.

## Figures

Table 3: Performance of trainees in Early Childhood Education by region



[Back to Abstract](#)