

Facilitating Learning through Collaboration in a World without Frontiers

Wendy Kitson-Piggott, The Caribbean Epidemiology Centre

Abstract

No one could have overseen the impact of the social consequences of the recent developments of communication media. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the discussion of these consequences became profoundly relevant due to the World Wide Web, a networked communication system encouraging the exchange and generating of knowledge by people throughout the world. Learning could now take place at a time and place convenient to learners rather than at the convenience of the education provider. New challenges and opportunities for creative and constructive interaction with a constantly changing world have made us more aware of the need for collaboration.

The proposed paper will discuss the need for collaboration as the key for the development of new learning environments. A number of areas for collaboration will be identified and practical examples of effective strategies to establish collaboration, especially in the area of resource sharing, will be discussed. Input will be asked from the participants. A number of areas for collaboration will be discussed based on the development of, and the results of an ongoing project that facilitates processes of creative and effective collaboration in the area of learning training.

INTRODUCTION

The interest in international development has a rich history that essentially began after the second world war. Several significant trends emerged during this period. In the fifties and sixties many colonies became independent. There was a growing awareness that, in order to live in peace, the sharing of resources had to take place. There was a growing recognition that access to more sophisticated technology was linked to increased economic power. The use of terms such as 'third world' and/or 'underdeveloped' and 'developing', to describe former colonies became increasingly common during this period. At this time, also, the concept of 'Third World' development was founded on the belief that 'developing' countries needed to 'catch up' with their more developed counterparts.

It was in this context that in the 1970's the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) was established. Over the years CARICOM has taken many important decisions, not only related to the economic development of the Caribbean region, but also to the improvement of regional health services infrastructure. Significant attention was, for example, focused on the increasing threat of HIV/AIDS, drug abuse and narcotics trafficking that threatened the region's health and stability.

It became increasingly apparent that in addition to foreign aid and foreign direct investment, technology transfer would be critical to a rapid increase in development. Thus, social and economic development in the decolonized countries had, to a great degree, begun to focus on the need to improve education systems, increasingly using more or less sophisticated technology and patterned on improvements in education made by the more developed countries (J. Visser, 2003).

The last decade has, fortunately, seen an increased awareness of the need to share resources in a world that is becoming increasingly interconnected, through, to a large extent, significant technological advances. The divide between developed/industrialised

countries and developing/industrialising countries is in some ways, slowly decreasing.

SCOPE OF THIS PAPER

This paper looks at distance education in the perspective of global collaboration and will argue that collaboration is the key to the development of new learning landscapes and learning environments. It also discusses the challenges of collaboration and identifies areas in the medical field (upgrading Medical Laboratory Technologists), where collaboration is in process and where creative and effective collaboration in the area of learning and training is recognized as being of utmost importance. Finally, in this paper, recommendations will be made on how to increase and enlarge regional and international collaboration. This discussion is in important ways based on work done by the ‘Strengthening of Medical Laboratory Services Project’, funded by the European Union and being implemented by the Caribbean Epidemiology Centre (CAREC).

EMERGENCE OF IMPORTANT CHANGES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

The relationship between technology and distance education has held significant importance from the very beginning. Distance education would never have developed in the way it has, if the postal systems in the 1800’s had not made it possible to distribute learning materials to students and institutions, if the copying machine had not been invented so that written materials could be produced in an effective and cheap way, and may not have made such a significant come-back if communication systems had not developed in such a dramatic way. Telephone- tutoring, audio cassettes and fax exchanges have been important technological support mechanisms that have enriched what was originally called correspondence education.

At the same time we saw the first developments in internationalization of distance education.

Expatriate parents living all over the world received learning materials for their children from England, the USA or another countries (e.g. Wye College, Calvert School). The military began to make use of the opportunities to retrain their soldiers, using distance education. A number of institutions started to offer distance education courses in the area of electronics, languages and a variety of upgrading skills training. Students in South Africa who under “apartheid” were not allowed to enroll at a traditional South-African university, now enrolled in programmes offered by UNISA (The University of South Africa). These were mostly inexpensive and rather effective courses and used practically only distance education, including audio cassettes.

The development of the Open University in the United Kingdom in the 1960’s further increased access to education as institutional education expanded past buildings and campuses. In the 1980’s distance education increasingly emerged as a valuable substitute for face-to-face education and training. The 1980’s and the 1990’s saw a considerable increase in the opportunities for distance education through developments in communication technology.

It was, however, the large scale development of computers and other communication media that really enriched distance education in such a way that it became an important and viable alternative to traditional education. Learning could now happen at a time and place convenient to learners rather than at the convenience of the education provider. Learning opportunities increased as did challenges. Competition increased as did collaboration.

GLOBALISATION

While the term ‘global village’ is now commonly used, the concept of ‘Globalisation’ has varied widely, with one commonly held interpretation being that ‘Globalisation’ really refers to the need for industrializing/developing countries to follow the patterns established by the industrialized/developed countries, especially in the areas of technology and communication.

Fortunately, more recently, globalisation increasingly pays attention to how we manage to share our resources, how we take responsibility for our global survival and for the development of human capacity as an important tool to make that survival possible. Greater emphasis is now being placed on the need to develop a networked global society that is effectively and efficiently responding to change. There is increasing awareness of the globe as being one – i.e. as being one single environment, and thus not compartmentalized. Globalisation is increasingly being viewed as a means of lowering or eliminating cultural, social, economic, and political borders, and promoting the formation of alliances.

THE IMPACT OF GLOBALISATION ON DISTANCE EDUCATION AND THE IMPACT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION ON GLOBALISATION

Distance education may never have achieved the status it presently has without the development of those new technologies which opened up challenging opportunities in the area of communication, making it possible to offer the advantages of traditional (face-to-face) education and the flexibility of distance learning. Evans (1997) argued for a broad understanding of the interrelationship between globalisation and distance education when he wrote that globalisation implies that most people are connected often, or from time to time, with distant events, since social, cultural and economic events are intimately connected more or less contemporaneously. Distance education may have a substantial or even decisive impact on how education and training will develop over the coming years and whether it will succeed in addressing the continual learning and training needs of the citizens of the world. To have this impact it is important for distance educators not only to react to learning and training needs, but to identify needs and to be actively involved in shaping the environment.

IMPACT OF PARTNERSHIPS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Collaboration and partnership in open and distance learning may have significant impact on society, educational institutions, students and facilitators.

Globalisation requires a society and its leaders to be aware of the need to collaborate – not only locally, but also regionally and internationally. It is the responsibility of a government to assume responsibility for critically reviewing the impact of increased globalization on all aspects of society, including education. It is, however, first of all necessary that countries have a plan. CAREC recently administered a large survey, aiming at, inter alia, obtaining information on the plans and collaborative distance education initiatives across the Caribbean region with a view to strengthening regional partnerships and facilitating the pooling of regional resources. Responses provided by senior personnel in the relevant Government Ministries, related private sector institutions, medical schools and laboratories indicated that few countries currently have concrete plans. Membership in professional distance education organisations with international or regional links such as JADOL or ICDE existed in only about half of the countries researched.

Governments could, through support for membership in international or regional organizations and virtual discussion groups etc., encourage reflection and interaction. Additionally, focusing on distance education allows for greater collaboration, more

effective and efficient outreach to a wider audience and the acquisition of content from a wider circle of providers. Sharing resources can, and will, have a positive impact on the development agenda. While financial support for distance education development is important it is not necessarily what is primarily needed. Developing an environment of collegiality where people could learn from each other and share experiences is critical. As the former Head of the World Bank said: “Distance learning is a tool that will enable this and benefit us all.” (Wolfensohn, 1998).

Creating the conditions for learning is a responsibility that rests not only with the Ministry of Education and its related ministries, but with the society at large accepting responsibility for the totality of learning that must occur. The various instructional organizations should be aware of each other’s interests and production and thus be interconnected. Together they form the instructional landscape: the learning landscape. Distance education with its potential flexibility and openness can play an important role in shaping this learning landscape, and thus in forming a learning society. CAREC sought to foster an environment of collaboration and collegiality through creating a regional forum for instructional organisations to reflect on existing resources and opportunities and identify unique joint regional approaches to the provision of distance education for medical laboratory technologists.

IMPACT ON INSTITUTIONS

Technologies currently available to support distance learners make it possible for institutions to look beyond their traditional borders. Given the relatively small size of the regional medical technologist student body, CAREC sought to encourage instructional institutions to find creative ways to expand their markets in a cost-effective manner. Maintaining consistent quality was a major concern. Quality issues are important and questions as to how the quality of distance education and training can be measured in a reliable way should be asked (as it should, of course, also be asked for classroom based education and training). Additionally, clarity and international agreement on the “interpretation” of the terms used in education, such as, for example, ‘completion rate’, is badly needed.

Institutions will have to be aware that if they engage in regional or international collaboration, challenging issues such as language, culture, and often also technology could arise. The CAREC survey identified a very big difference among Caribbean countries with respect to access to computers and to the internet. An encouraging percentage of future students had access to computers, but the cost of internet access was often prohibitive, in some instances upward of US \$ 60 a month. Thus, it could not be assumed that students with access to computers would automatically be able to access training via online courses or programmes. The survey also showed that, while most medical laboratories had computers and internet access, technologists or future students, were not necessarily allowed to use them.

Given the evident importance of distance education to development, CAREC sought, as a priority, to gather extensive information on services offered and/or needs and limitations from a wide range of stakeholders - institutions, students, decision-makers, education providers and material developers¹. Emerging from the data collected in this survey was the evidence of growing regional and international cooperation, with the University of the West Indies, for example, providing an excellent example of progress in distance learning programming in the region and institutions such as the University of Technology (UTECH) in Jamaica and the Barbados Community College (BCC), placing increasing focus on developing a distance education infrastructure.

IMPACT ON LEARNERS AND FACILITATORS

Existing distance education technologies make it possible for students to look beyond their traditional borders and to search for education and training at institutions and organizations all over the world. Although this sounds rather encouraging, it is also true that getting a degree or a diploma abroad could be costly. These opportunities are often only for the “happy few”. Universities and Colleges from all over the world are currently targeting prospective students, emphasising the quality of their programmes and the value of having a diploma from a foreign university. The difficulty of studying using a foreign programme is sometimes forgotten. Problems of connectivity, cultural differences and language could arise. Thus, investing in regional programmes, in courses that are affordable for many future students would enrich the “learning” climate both within Caribbean countries and across the region. While collaboration is very important, emphasis on improving the national learning landscape and building a strong national workforce should be seen as critical to building the regional and international landscape.

In this era of globalization it is no longer a particular country, or even a particular region that is threatened by the spread of serious diseases. Emerging and new infections are a world threat. Countries with a high HIV infection rate are not only facing important social problems, but also the risk of isolation. Tourism, for so many developing countries an important source of income, may decrease and poverty may increase.

Given this context, a well-trained medical laboratory staff will be a crucial force in the prevention and control of communicable diseases. CAREC has recognized the importance of training and has been very active in providing training for Medical Laboratory Personnel. CAREC has also facilitated agreement to and acceptance of a common standard, the ISO 15189:2003 international standard for medical laboratory operations. As a consequence of this agreed standard the upgrading of thousands of medical laboratory technologists across the region is now required. In developing the necessary training strategies, CAREC as a first step sought to identify the knowledge, skills and infrastructural gaps through surveying more than a thousand participants in 2005 and the first half of 2006. Among the several respondent groups were laboratory staff and laboratory managers. This extensive body of data is still being analysed but some of the preliminary results are as follows:

- Ninety-eight percent of the respondents is interested in receiving further training
- On the average, prospective students are prepared to invest 3 hours of their free time weekly to get additional training
- Close to 70% of laboratory staff have received some kind of additional training (often just a few days).
- Only 15% has ever participated in distance education. This includes a one or two day upgrading course that involved either computers or audio/video recorders.
- Respondents saw lack of time (46%), financial limitations (19%) and lack of motivation/drive (12%) as the most important challenges.
- The main benefits of studying are, according to respondents, increased knowledge 58%, career and self-fulfillment 35%. Better work relations was also seen as a beneficial outcome.
- Almost 50% of the students have a career plan. Asked to describe their career plan, close to half of them did not respond, while 22 % wanted to pursue further education, 13% want to get a higher degree, and another 13% wanted to get an official diploma indicating that they are qualified Medical Laboratory Technologists.
- The laboratories that have computers, will be reluctant to let them be used by students (35% may, according to laboratory staff, be used by them for training purposes)

The above examples illustrate that collaboration cannot be something that is haphazardly initiated. It involves thorough knowledge of the existing situation and environment. As an outcome of this research, CAREC will seek to ensure that the region is informed about the training needs, the expectations, the available support mechanisms (human resources and technology), and the accessibility and connectivity in the region. This is an important step in satisfying the needs of students and of instructors.

CONCLUSION

Collaboration is intricately linked to meaningful development and should be interpreted in its real sense – working together. The current Strengthening of Medical Laboratory Services project is a valid example of growing collaboration among developing countries seeking to identify innovative ways to solve the problems of underdevelopment. It is a serious attempt to solve an identified complex problem in an analytical and systematic way. Buzzwords are not helpful, but concern, dedication and collaboration can and will make a difference in the way we and our descendants will live our lives.

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