

Engendering Development Needs: 'Doing' Gender Through Distance Learning In The English-Speaking Caribbean

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Abstract

The Caribbean is described as less-developed, yet, its people are very conscious of contemporary developments in technology as well as the critical importance assigned to 'high' technology skills and training. 'High' technology usually requires financial and other resources not readily available in the Caribbean. Against this background, this paper presents a case study of a Distance Undergraduate Diploma Programme in Gender and Development Studies offered at the University of the West Indies to students in the English - speaking Caribbean. This programme seeks to develop a cadre of individuals in the Caribbean who can use gender as a tool of analysis in developing project proposals, programmes and policies responsive to the needs of women and men in their respective countries. It focuses on the distinctiveness of the Caribbean reality to examine the extent to which the programme design is consistent with its philosophy. This new model of learning requires a shift from a behavioral paradigm to one utilizing feminist teaching methods and, hence, the role of technology becomes a critical site for analysis of the programme's utility and success. Challenges faced, best practices and invaluable lessons learned are identified.

INTRODUCTION:

The term 'distance education' conjures up different images for different persons depending on where in the world they are situated. For persons in economically affluent societies distance education revolves primarily around practices requiring use of "high" technology. Distance education for such persons is usually synonymous to online, web-based learning and real time (synchronous) learning activities with less reliance on delayed (asynchronous) learning that is dependent on the printed text. In developing countries such as the Caribbean, where this distance programme is situated, however, it is mainly understood as delayed (asynchronous) learning and mixed modes of learning facilitated through 'low' technology. This conception however is not based on lack of knowledge of the benefits of 'high' technology and its potential as a mechanism through which change can be accomplished in the region, but by the reality that considerations of economic constraints as well as cultural implications must serve as primary 'drivers' in the conception of a distance programme if it is to be successful. As the instructional designer/Programme Coordinator of an Undergraduate Diploma Programme in Gender and Development Studies I was cognizant of this fact, especially in view of the context, which required a shift from the traditional behavioural paradigm that objectifies learners and reduces them to passive learners, to a feminist approach that requires active learners.

In the remainder of his paper I will examine the context in which this Diploma Programme in Gender and Development Studies evolved, the underlying frameworks influencing its design, the choice of pedagogy and philosophy and the distinctiveness of the Caribbean situation that accounts for the corresponding choice of technology. Essentially my thesis is pedagogy must not be "derailed" at the expense of promoting "high" technology. In designing this distance programme, therefore, consideration for the cultural context of the participants and desirable pedagogy took precedence over choice of technology used.

Consideration therefore became how best to find appropriate “low” technology that could adequately do the job. The paper concludes with insights into future implications for the target group and the programme design.

THE CARIBBEAN CONTEXT – FRAMEWORKS FOR THE DISTANCE PROGRAMME:

Issues of unequal power have long been a deterrent to national development in Caribbean societies. With the conclusion of the Beijing Platform for Action in which governments were called upon to challenge their existing social structures and to create opportunities for women, and the subsequent Millennium Development goals in 2000, many governments in the region have now committed to promoting gender equality. This commitment however requires individuals with not only understandings of gender issues but skills to challenge existing structures of inequality, particularly those based on gender and to create opportunities for promoting gender equality. In response to this need the Centre for Gender and Development Studies, Regional Coordinating Unit (CGDSRCU) at the Mona Campus of the University of the West Indies (UWI), in 2003, introduced the 18-month distance Undergraduate Diploma Programme in Gender and Development Studies. The programme was intended to equip individuals with the understandings and skills to challenge existing structures of inequality, particularly those based on gender, and to create opportunities for promoting gender equality. The programme aimed to develop a cadre of persons in the Caribbean who would both acquire the skills of gender analysis and be willing to challenge existing social structures and promote change in their respective societies. These understandings and skills are of particular relevance at this time to personnel charged with the responsibility of carrying forward governments’ mandate for change.

The rationale for this distance programme was structured primarily around three frameworks. One framework emerged from the mission and objectives of the CGDSRCU, which articulate a commitment to a programme of teaching, research and outreach in which gender and other related factors are used as tools of analysis in the generation and reconstruction of knowledge, which acts as a catalyst for change. The second framework emerged from issues raised in the Beijing Platform for Action. These had been identified as critical issues in the region and served as stimulus for the initial conceptualization of the programme. This was a precursor to the Millennium Development Goals of which goal three, “the empowerment of women”, now drives the programme. The third and final framework emerged from the strategic goals of UWI to expand access to students in the Caribbean region through distance learning to achieve qualitative transformation. To promote the type of change envisioned, modern technology is viewed by UWI as a major force for not only triggering change but as a mechanism through which change can be accomplished (Leo-Rhynie, 2006).

The CGDSRCU responded to this challenge through development of a distance mode programme. The intention was to expand the reach of the CGDS’ teaching programmes to groups geographically distanced from the three main teaching campuses of the University, and therefore to target individuals in the twelve non-campus countries. All three frameworks came together to influence the design of the distance Undergraduate Programme in Gender and Development Studies. However, while the need for modern technology for the 21st century features prominently in the UWI vision for expansion and access to students, the current facilities of UWI and the context of the target group for this distance programme did not make it feasible to use ‘high’ technology. The benefit of “high” technology, though a valuable tool, was not considered the best way to proceed then to meet the particular needs of this target group.

DESIGNING THE PROGRAMME – INTEGRATING IMPORTANT FEATURES OF THE CURRICULUM

Conceptualization of this programme design required careful examination of the aims of the programme and its compatibility with the course content, the implications of pedagogy for teaching Gender Studies as a discipline and the underlying philosophy required to 'drive' the programme. These considerations consequently placed the target group and their cultural context at the nucleus of the curriculum design process. .

The Target Group - Distinctiveness of the Caribbean Reality

In any successful curriculum design the target group becomes the most important consideration for the instructional designer. For this curriculum design it was particularly important because of the distinctiveness of the Caribbean situation. For a number of persons in the Caribbean, computer technology is not always readily available. In view of this limited educational resource, and challenges faced by potential clients to access education due to geographical constraints, the UWI had established Centres in strategically located sections in the 14 English-speaking Caribbean countries which it services. While the quality resources of the centres may differ, essentially each Centre is staffed to provide both academic and technology support for students. Services provided include distribution of printed materials to students for distance learning programmes, studios for teleconference classes, computer labs, and classrooms for tutoring and/or face-to-face examinations.

It's within this framework, mediated by the specific characteristics of participants, that the decision for the type of technology to be used was made.

Participants targeted for this programme were adult women and men working in non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Women's Bureaux, community and international development agencies, social service agencies and national planning institutions. While there have been a few exceptions, this target group usually consisted of persons in their 40s. With this age group, implications for the type of technology used in the programme became a critical issue. Participants were intimidated by computer technology. Access to personal computers was limited, and consequently any reliance on this technology would mean mainly using the limited facilities of the computer lab at the UWI local centres, or use of computers in the work place if available. In some cases computers were available in workplaces but there was no Internet access. Participants also entered with different academic qualifications ranging from low level matriculation to persons with masters degrees. Consideration for the design of the programme was further complicated because participants' initial orientation to learning had made them highly dependent on the teacher. This held implications for achievement of the programme aims through the application of "feminist pedagogy".

Aims of the Programme

Given the diversity of participants in the programme, and inadequate "high" technology to facilitate distance learning, very creative planning was needed to find the best mix between pedagogy and available technology that could achieve the following aims of the programme:

1. To develop an awareness of how gender shapes personal consciousness and interpersonal relationships and determines the social, political, and economic inequalities between men and women in Caribbean society; and

2. To develop the ability to use gender as a tool of analysis in the development of projects, programmes and policies, and so make them more responsive to the specific needs of women and men.

The first aim was facilitated through print mode in the form of course manuals distributed to students through their local Centres. The second, although not explicitly stated is to develop the participants as “change agents”, given the course content and the programme rationale. However, given the constraints already mentioned, this posed some challenges.

Programme Content

The cluster of eight courses in the programme was included primarily to address a range of critical gender issues pertinent to the Caribbean region, including issues of economics and development, education, health, religion and the law. In addition to these critical issues two courses, one on feminist theory and another on research methods, were included to provide learners with a theoretical and practical base for conducting gender analyses. Theory is viewed as an essential element in the programme. According to bell hooks (2000, p.6) “Everything we do in life is rooted in theory. Whether we consciously explore the reasons we have a particular perspective or take a particular action there is also an underlying system shaping thought and practice”. Both theory and research served to form the integrative thread for the other courses in the programme and therefore influenced the sequence of the eight courses. Both were also essential for the Research Project.

Figure 1: Courses

Nature of Gender Studies as a Discipline

Ideally, the location of Gender Studies within feminist academic enterprise required use of “feminist pedagogy”. In this programme “feminist pedagogy” was taken to mean teaching practices that removed structures of domination [dictators within the classroom], promoted student accountability, and aided self actualization and life-long learning. The term “feminist pedagogy” however, is not clearly defined in the literature. One may even argue that there is no such approach. However, since the imperatives that propel Gender Studies require interrogation of knowledge, a constructivist theory of learning was selected as the most suitable working definition for the programme design. Constructivism, a contrasting view to the objectivist/behaviorist model, and more in keeping with feminist views of knowledge, saw knowledge as being constructed rather than received.

Achieving “feminist pedagogy” would require moving from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred learning environment. This would not be an easy achievement given the target group’s orientation to learning which was rooted in an objectivist model where teaching is highly structured, systematic and teacher directed, relegating learners to passive receptacles of knowledge. The challenge in using this pedagogy therefore was how best to successfully implement it given the constraints inherent in the target group’s years of orientation to learning that made them highly dependent on the teacher. This was further exacerbated because in addition to their learning orientation, distance learning was new to the target group. For the distance learner who lacks autonomy and self-directiveness, isolation, the enemy of the distance learner, can become a serious problem, resulting in student drop-out from the programme. The challenge, therefore, was to negotiate the critical space between student support from the instructor to prevent student isolation, and development of autonomy on the part of the student.

Philosophical Underpinnings of the Programme

A common phenomenon of curricula practice is the tendency for each curriculum to take

on the individual philosophy of its users, primarily the instructors providing instruction. This phenomenon in teaching can lead to the derailment of the overall goals of a programme if individual instructors hold contrary and divergent philosophies. Being cognizant of this I deliberately sought to avoid this by including instructors on a regular basis in dialogue that articulated the philosophy of the programme and encouraged discussion on how best to achieve this philosophy in individual courses. This turned out to be an important feature of this programme as it kept instructors focused on both the process and the end- product.

The underlying philosophy of this programme was grounded in assumptions of the adult learner, as postulated by Malcolm Knowles, and in the principles advocated for adult learning. Consequently, the learning environment created for adult learners in this programme sought to accommodate the unique characteristics of the adult learner (Knowles, 1984). These assumptions encouraged a shift from the subject-centred, most familiar to the participants, to a problem-centered approach, making the programme learner-centred in focus. Thus learning in the programme goes beyond acquiring information and critical and analytical skills but more importantly to developing the type of understanding that empowers the learner to challenge existing social inequalities and promote change based on gendered analyses.

Having decided on the important features in the design of the programme the next challenge was to find the best combination of available technology to engender development needs in the implementation of the programme.

ENGENDERING DEVELOPMENT NEEDS - THE ROLE OF PEDAGOGY AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE PROGRAMME

Development is broadly understood as a multi-faceted process with economic, social, cultural and political dimensions (Girvan, 1986) and has been further elaborated in recent years to focus on the human being as both agent and beneficiary of the process (Sen, 2000). It was clear, then, that engendering development needs in the Caribbean would require individuals who are prepared to challenge existing practices as well as persons willing to act as change agents. The test of this programme therefore, through its aims, underlying philosophy of learning, and pedagogy/andragogy, was to produce individuals with the knowledge and skills to apply gender as a tool of analysis to promote change in their respective societies. Encouraging passive learners would not achieve the aims and overall goal of the programme and the "pure" form of constructivism was not the answer at this time either. I opted, therefore, to take the middle ground since no one metaphor of learning was sufficient to explain how all learning takes place; both could prove useful for addressing instructional problems. While this paper cannot adequately address this strategy I will simply point out that the decision was to use activities that remove the teacher-centred element and give learners more control over their learning. So although instructional materials [course manuals] were framed within a behavioral framework, learners were given activities that required them to develop skills as autonomous learners.

In keeping with the philosophical considerations, as well as concerns related to distance learning, implementation began with a formal "needs assessment" of the adults, which measured their comfort level with, and competency in, the field of gender studies as well as with the use of technology. This assessment provided facilitators with guidelines for implementing a learner-centred programme. The objective was to create a learning environment which would challenge students who already had a formal understanding of the area of Gender Studies, as well as create for those who needed it, a climate conducive to developing the requisite initial understandings and skills. Learners were subsequently provided with opportunities [through learning activities and individual feedback] that coincided with their individual situations and levels of competency.

In view of the pedagogical/andragogical considerations what then would be the appropriate role of technology? If it is not carefully framed by pedagogical/andragogical strategies, technology could end up replicating the very institutional hierarchies of power and access critiqued by feminists. Use of an acquisition metaphor would only emphasize learning specific content as opposed to the participation metaphor where emphasis would be on learning how to learn. The following technologies were therefore combined to achieve a blended learning approach to promote a “feminist pedagogy”:

Role of Technology

In an attempt to achieve a Blended Learning approach the programme utilized available technologies to provide both synchronous and asynchronous modes of instruction to Caribbean learners in the virtual classroom. The primary modes of course delivery remained print, and teleconferencing (audio) that allow for student and facilitator discussions.

Technology was utilized in two ways: (i) to facilitate the art of teaching adult learners (andragogy) and (ii) to maintain ongoing communication between students and facilitators as well as among students. In the second case, the objective is to provide student support and promote a community of learners that would eliminate isolation of learners. The tools used most frequently were e-mail and chat rooms and when required, telephone conversations. The underlying intention was to introduce available electronic technology incrementally to meet the needs of learners and allow for participatory methodologies that best exemplify feminist approaches in learning.

In addition to the technology, face-to-face (f2f) interaction took place once during an academic year at which time the programme coordinator, accompanied by an instructor visited students in their local Centre to engage in course specific interactions involving group and individual activities. The f2f and the audio mode of instruction continue to be the most preferred modes of instruction for the target group.

Assessment Methods

Course assessment involved a variety of methods that supported the underlying philosophy of the program. Assessment strategies such as journal writing, discussions, and problem based essays required use of interviews and other techniques to gather data to incorporate in written essays or oral discussions. These offered better opportunities for meaningful learning and accountability for adult learners. In addition, these approaches allowed participants to build on their work experiences, use data from their local contexts and allow for individualised learning. There was no written examination.

For completion of the 18-month programme students were also required to do a small research project. This allowed learners to focus on a topic related to gender studies that is of interest to them, and to apply skills as a “change agent”.

CONCLUSION

This distance programme continues its cyclical process. Consequently ongoing evaluation and needs assessment of participants serve as important elements in its renewal each academic year. Key findings in terms of the challenges experienced, best practices, and lessons learned are listed below:

Challenges

A major challenge for this programme has been implementing a “feminist pedagogy”

because of the constraints of technology that did not allow for adequate “discussion” sessions outside of teleconference classes and independent of an instructor. It was also challenging to achieve a learner-centred environment because of students’ former orientation to learning that promoted the “Banking Concept” of education (Freire, 1970).

Best Practices

Some of the best practices that lead to successful learning include the following:

- Use of a Programme Coordinator committed to the overall goals of the programme and who functions as a curriculum leader has provided overall focus and structure for the programme. This has proven to be the single most important feature contributing to the continuation of this programme.
- Engaging in ongoing reflective practice by learners, facilitators and the programme coordinator for the purpose of personal development and programme improvement.

Invaluable Lessons Learned

- Development of a learning environment that inspires trust, encourages dialogue, and reduces student isolation is critical for moving participants from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred mode of learning.
- To facilitate a learner-centred environment a strategy of student support was devised by using structures such as rubrics, study guides, and timelines to develop independence and accountability as adult learners.
- The role of individual tutoring to address diagnosed student academic needs became an important strategy which provided students with skills to make them independent learners, and this in an environment with wide- ranging of academic levels.
- The oral tradition of the Caribbean people should not be discounted. Its value in this programme could not have been better served by any substitution of a “high” technology.
- Understanding of ones target group is invaluable in deciding on the technology to be used and how to introduce that technology. An incremental approach to introducing technology to this target group proved extremely valuable

Glimpse into the Future

- The programme was not initially designed for online delivery/high technology. The way of the future does, however, indicate the feasibility of using an open source course management system such as MOODLE to facilitate this programme. Any decision for future change however, will always place the target group as the nucleus of the design, “feminist pedagogy” as the “driving force”, with technology simply as the vehicle for the achievement of the programme goals.

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Figures

Figure 1: Courses



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