

Facilitator training for distance education contact sessions

S. T. Mampane*

T. A. Ogina*

e-mail: taogina@up.ac.za

*University of Pretoria

Pretoria, South Africa

e-mail: sharon.mampane@up.ac.za

Abstract

Distance education (DE), a term applied to study programmes dealing with students who study independently, is characterised by a lecturer/presenter acting as a facilitator to engage students. The facilitator and the students are separated in space and time. The DE factors that contribute to students' success or failure include the extent to which facilitators have been trained and prepared and have received support before the contact sessions, as well as the facilitators' ability to interact with the students and to create an opportunity for interaction among the students. This article is based on the training and preparation facilitators at the University of Pretoria receive in order to improve their professional practice in the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE), for the Education Management programme that teaches students who study on their own. Five facilitators of the ACE programme in the Eastern Cape and Limpopo provinces were purposively sampled and interviewed. The findings revealed that there was no standardised training programme designed for the facilitators, resulting in some facilitators being better prepared than others. These findings will make a contribution towards the design of a proactive DE facilitator support programme for the achievement of excellence in DE.

INTRODUCTION

Distance higher education is one of the components of higher education policy provisions such as the Higher Education Act, 1997 (RSA 1997), *Education White Paper 3* (DoE 1997) and the *National Plan for Higher Education* (NPHE) (RSA 2001). In South Africa, distance education (DE) is provided by facilitators at public universities and universities of technology (Matsilisa 2007, 1). South Africa, like the rest of the world, has shifted from correspondence education (based solely on the delivery of materials without any structured interaction) towards DE, in which contact and structured opportunities for interaction between facilitators and students are integrated into the programme design (Badat 2005, 379). The

term ‘distance education’ thus refers to an intentional process of teaching and learning in which physical space separates facilitators and students. Students and facilitators communicate through various media, and an educational organisation exists to design, facilitate and evaluate the educational process (Scardamalia 2002, 1). This article explores how facilitators experience the preparation and training given to them prior to facilitation of the contact sessions and the effect of facilitator *training for the delivery of contact sessions* in a DE programme.

The most important requirement for achieving excellence in DE is a well-planned, proactive training and preparation programme for facilitators. Effective DE training enables facilitators to adapt traditional teaching strategies to the new learning environment for adult learning. Where appropriate training exists, the facilitators’ level of understanding and experience is enhanced and the facilitators become highly competent and deliver quality instruction. If the facilitators are not adequately trained, their abilities are curtailed and they find it difficult to interact with students (Massyn 2002, 139).

BACKGROUND

DE instructors/facilitators are employed on a contract basis by the University of Pretoria’s DE administrators. The facilitators are mostly teachers, heads of departments, deputy principals and principals. They are part of the academic team and their role is important in that it lessens the workload of the full-time staff (Riffie 2003, 1; Roberson 2002; Scagnoli 2001). According to Howel, Williams and Lindsay (2003, 5), facilitators should be course content experts. They should be accessible to students and operate as a team with the facilitators of the other modules. It is furthermore important that they have access to on-campus lecturers. Their arrangement with the university is a significant factor affecting DE (Miller 2001; Williams 2003).

As the role of DE at the University of Pretoria expands, it is imperative that module coordinators examine the arrangement prospects and facilitation problems of DE in order to address these at contact sessions (Wilson, Litle, Coleman and Gallagher 1998). The students attending Contact Sessions reside in all the provinces of South Africa, and the DE contact sessions are conducted at venues at colleges, universities or schools closest to the students. The University of Pretoria’s Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) programme is a formal diploma qualification for teachers who are already teaching and who study part time. The programme was launched in 2000 and offers six modules/courses. Each module is presented by part-time facilitators, who hold at least one advanced degree, and full-time lecturers, who hold masters and doctoral degrees.

The facilitators present their specialised modules for approximately four hours per day. The dual mission of the programme, namely, excellent teaching and commitment to students' improvement, is clearly communicated to facilitators during the training sessions.

One of the most beneficial consequences of DE delivery is the interaction between the facilitator and students and among students at the contact sessions. The collaboration between the facilitator and students creates a symbiotic relationship, benefiting both the facilitator and the students (Calvert 1986). The effectiveness of DE depends on how well it is designed and delivered. According to Sherry (1990), the facilitator's ability to be caring, confident, experienced and creative, and to engage with students is an important factor for successful facilitation.

FACILITATOR TRAINING AND PREPARATION

Organisations undertaking DE initiatives should not only have the capacity to prepare, train and support facilitators, but should also invest in or obtain the necessary resources in order for training to be effective (McLean 2001). The resources provided in the ACE programme at the University of Pretoria are used during the four series of contact sessions per year – two short and two long contact sessions. Before every series of contact sessions, the module coordinators conduct compulsory facilitators' training to sharpen the facilitators' skills and provide support (Massyn 2002). The module coordinators organise and plan the course, and ensure that the facilitators receive all the material on time. At the training workshop, the coordinators are able to see all the facilitators at once and to solve any module-related problems.

The training of facilitators is important, as most of them do not work for the university full-time. Training sessions give module coordinators the opportunity to ensure that the facilitators' skills are of a high quality, and to identify the facilitators' strengths and areas for development. The module coordinators are responsible for the quality of their modules' academic content and for ensuring that the facilitators adapt to continuous developments in the particular modules of the programme. During the preparation and training of facilitators, it is important that the module coordinator considers the module content, the different needs of the learners and other contextual factors (Carnwell 2000; Sherry 1996). Module coordinators visit the facilitators at the various venues of the contact sessions. The purpose of this is to assess and support the facilitators' presentation skills, their engagement with the content, and their personal contact with the students. In turn, facilitators are responsible for the assessment of the students to identify

student needs and to help the module coordinator plan for future student and facilitator training. Students are given guidance by the facilitator from all the learning material supplied to the students and the facilitators (Garrison and Baynton 1987).

CONTACT SESSIONS

Attendance of contact sessions is not compulsory, but students are encouraged to attend. The number of students who attend contact sessions varies. Attendance at the venues determines the facilitation of group work. Where group work is possible, students are allocated different tasks from the study guide and worksheets. On the first day, students are usually passive and expect the facilitators to do everything for them. Facilitators ensure that the students know what is expected of them and motivate and encourage them to participate in groups. To enable students to reach the set goals, facilitators are expected to make critical and constructive suggestions on work that students struggle to understand.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researchers used a qualitative approach to collect data from ten participants in two cities in two different provinces of South Africa, namely, Tzaneen in Limpopo and East London in the Eastern Cape. All the participants who volunteered to be interviewed were male and acted as facilitators at contact sessions. The criteria used in selecting the participants included willingness to participate in the study and ease of access of contact sessions facilitated (Merriam 1998, 61).

METHOD

Semi-structured face-to-face in-depth interviews were used to collect data (McMillan 2000) on the facilitators' experience of training, preparation and support for the delivery of DE contact sessions. The interview questions were open-ended, and multiple and various responses were elicited from the participants (Merriam 1998, 9; Yin 2003, 22–23). Each participant was interviewed for 20 to 30 minutes and the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The verbatim transcripts produced from the interviews were coded and the codes were grouped into categories. From these categories a number of themes emerged.

The interviewees were given interview transcripts and the emerging themes to verify the accuracy of the data and the interpretation thereof. Transcripts of data analysis were also peer-reviewed to verify the integrity of the data. Informed by the research purpose, the researchers asked exploratory, explanatory and descriptive

questions (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, 338) in this *instrumental* case study approach. *Exploratory questions* focused on the possibility of the preparation and training of facilitators; the roles of facilitators at the contact sessions; and their recommendations regarding training, preparation and facilitation of the contact sessions. *Explanatory questions* helped to reassess and refine issues to interpret the key findings. *Descriptive questions* revealed the significance and impact of the experience of facilitating contact sessions, and the successes and challenges involved (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, 388–389).

The following questions were asked:

1. How were you trained, prepared and given support for the contact sessions, and do you consider it beneficial?
2. How do you experience the facilitation of the contact sessions?
3. What is your role with regard to student expectations at the contact sessions, and why?
4. What successes or challenges did you experience at the contact sessions?
5. What would you recommend to improve the training and preparation for DE contact sessions?

RESULTS

The following five themes emerged as the key findings of the study:

1. Preparation and training of facilitators

Respondents indicated the importance and usefulness of training as enhancing the level of facilitators' preparedness and confidence to deliver quality instruction. Recognising the importance of training, some facilitators felt that training should be done adequately. When responding to whether preparation for the contact session was done and whether it was of benefit or not, one new facilitator said:

Yes, especially because it is my first time. You have to know your stuff. You cannot just go there unprepared and embarrass yourself in front of people. Your listeners will expect you to be prepared and to get additional information. (Facilitator 3, Limpopo)

Other facilitators emphasised the fact that training was important, but should take place continuously, since different students and different environments have different needs. One of them commented as follows:

You have to reflect, you discover new things as you go on. Extra preparation means making things easier for the students. For example, I find that every time I present to new students, I have to use a different approach and examples to make them understand better. You have to update yourself all the time. (Facilitator 5, Limpopo)

One facilitator felt that the training was inadequate, and said that the module coordinator did not actually prepare, nor give support to the new presenters. The facilitator questioned the expertise of the module coordinator, and said the following:

I think the training is not beneficial. I think it is a waste of time and money from the university and for the people that are doing it. For me it is a punishment if I know that I must go and listen to the same story again and again. I even feel that maybe they can gain more from our experience, from us than from the coordinator who has not been in the programme long. (Facilitator 2, Eastern Cape)

Another facilitator said that training was not done at all and that the meeting's purpose was to hand out the relevant material and the timetable. This facilitator indicated that he was concerned and worried since this was his first experience. The concern became evident to the module coordinator. This was the facilitator's comment:

It was just a meeting where we received material and guidelines for the week. I was fearful because this was my first time. The module coordinator pulled me aside after the meeting and we had a discussion to guide me on how to go about it. I did find it useful. For the others it was a quick going through the agenda. The whole meeting did not take longer than 30 minutes. (Facilitator 3, Limpopo)

Some facilitators felt that money was wasted by calling them to a training session where little was done. These facilitators felt that they had already been trained, because they had been in the programme for a long time, but they were concerned about the new presenters. Below are their comments:

Whether the new presenters know exactly what has to be done is also questionable. To spend less than one hour training facilitators, for me, it is not sufficient. I think the new presenters need, perhaps, one day or so. (Facilitator 1, Eastern Cape)

All the facilitators agreed that training should be done continuously, despite the fact that some facilitators had been in the programme for a long time. The importance of training facilitators cannot be underestimated, because it gives them confidence to interact with the students and improve their skills. Facilitators who are inadequately trained or ill-prepared may become insecure, leading to a breakdown in their interaction with students.

2. The experience of facilitating contact sessions

The facilitators initially assumed that facilitation of DE would be difficult, as all the ACE students were qualified teachers. They thought the students would have high expectations with regard to their facilitation skills and would be better prepared. The following comment summarises their experiences:

In my first contact session I thought that I would meet teachers who are highly intelligent, asking challenging questions and all that, but I did not experience that. I then realised that we have a lot to do to help our teachers. I said to myself, these are teachers who should teach students some skill that they do not have. (Facilitator 1, Limpopo)

All facilitators initially had some fears about the challenging questions they would get from students. What makes facilitation a challenge is the fact that students do not do self-study or prepare for contact sessions, but expect to be successful after these sessions.

3. The role of facilitators as expected by students at the contact sessions

It seems that the facilitators' role is hampered by students who do not participate in contact sessions due to a lack of preparation. This is what some of the facilitators said about their roles at contact sessions:

I make it easier for them to understand the programme and to ensure that they learn something about education management. They have to improve themselves as teachers and hopefully pass at the end of the year. We are doing more than enough to give them the relevant information. (Facilitator 1, Eastern Cape)

They should ask questions, probe you as a presenter. It also gives you an opportunity to explain in different ways so that they understand. I would expect participation and involvement. (Facilitator 6, Limpopo)

Perraton (1988) states that the role of the DE facilitator is to become a facilitator of learning, rather than a communicator of a fixed body of knowledge. The approach should be learner centred and should encourage critical thinking skills and learner engagement. Because the learners are teachers, a higher level of learning is recommended.

4. The successes and challenges of facilitating at contact sessions

When the facilitators were asked about the successes attained in facilitation, the following responses were given:

Success is not only about me being here or teaching at the contact session, but also about reaching out to students or teachers that want to better themselves, I think, really, we are providing a service to the community. (Facilitator 5, Limpopo)

I was a presenter in Bloemfontein and two of my students each sent me an SMS, both of them had got distinctions in the module I presented. I said to myself this is great! It means that I was able to get through to some of them. I regard it as a success even if they are only two. (Facilitator 1, Limpopo)

The same facilitators also raised concerns about some of the challenges they faced outside of facilitation. They indicated the following challenges:

There are some students who travel from far and come to the sessions tired. If only we can get the sessions closer to their homes. I also think in some cases the classrooms are too small for them because these are adults. They are crammed in a small classroom in small desks. (Facilitator 6, Limpopo)

On top of the fact that students don't prepare, another challenge is the language problem. It is difficult explaining concepts if there is a language problem and they have a problem because English is not their first language and in some cases it is not even their second language. The content is too difficult for them to grasp immediately. (Facilitator 2, Limpopo)

These findings are consistent with the report of Garrison (Denzin and Lincoln 2000), who indicates that the quality and integrity of the educational process depends on sustained, two-way communication and the provision of adequate facilities/resources beforehand. This finding reveals that DE models and practices should be adapted to the social, cultural, economic and political circumstances of students and their environment.

Geidt (1996, 16–19) mentions that students have to be prepared beforehand, but since the texts are not in the students' language of communication, facilitators cannot get students accustomed to interpreting textual messages critically.

5. The recommendations of facilitators about contact sessions

Facilitators made the following recommendations for improving the DE programme:

I realise that we work for long hours. It is tiring. The university can at least have two people presenting at different times for the same module or reduce the time. (Facilitator 6, Limpopo)

I do believe the University of Pretoria has tried everything in their power to make it easier by bringing us overhead projectors and so forth. But I think we need to move

to the next step, for example, laptops and projectors to make sure students take more in. (Facilitator 5, Limpopo)

DISCUSSION

In designing effective DE, not only the goals, needs and characteristics of teachers and students need to be considered, but also content requirements and technical constraints. Training should be planned well ahead of time so that facilitators can become acquainted with the material and come prepared to the contact sessions. During training, the facilitators can then ask questions and get reassurance about sections that were not clear. If a facilitator is not trained, some students will pick it up and they will lose confidence in the facilitator. Training and preparation should be continuous because knowledge develops all the time, so facilitators should keep abreast of any new developments in order to improve their competence and subject mastery (Schamber 1988). This means that even experienced facilitators need to develop and, in turn, develop other inexperienced facilitators.

Training is important, therefore, it should not be assumed that experienced facilitators are competent; nor should it be assumed that the learners (who are themselves teachers) will be well prepared and competent enough to ask challenging questions at the contact sessions. Training should be structured such that there is a common understanding among the participants, because if not, there is a possibility that some of the facilitators' needs will not be addressed. All facilitators have to adjust their style and mode of facilitation according to the nature and kind of students they encounter.

Facilitation should not only be content and exam driven, but should also encourage critical thinking skills and student interaction. Facilitation should be geared towards deeper learning in order to develop personal and professional growth that will have an impact on community development. For facilitation to be effective, factors such as the learning, language, environment and distance of travel to contact sessions, and student comfort should be considered for student success. It is important sometimes to allow for code switching among the students because learners learn better from one another.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the strategies in DE is personalising instruction. The facilitation of contact sessions demands thorough training, preparation and support. Because facilitators are required to establish contact with students and to facilitate interaction among students, they should provide assistance with questions or discussions held

during the contact sessions (Willis 1993). It is imperative to provide training to facilitators before each series of contact sessions. Each series will be different, as a different set of students attend the sessions each time. It is recommended that facilitators never say they are familiar with the material to be presented and that training should be conducted on a continuous basis. This will enable facilitators to share their experiences with other presenters and to develop their own skills. Knowledge should be shared, so experienced facilitators can be used for this, especially if there is a new facilitator in the programme. Those with experience can learn from the non-experienced and vice versa.

It is also recommended that no assumptions be made about either the facilitators' or the students' competence. Competence needs to be explored in order to determine the level of both facilitators and students as this will help to identify facilitators' needs and to design an effective training programme for students. When training facilitators, it is recommended that the learning style of the different students be considered. This requires a lot of creativity on the part of facilitators. Although training is academically oriented, it should be structured in such a manner that there is a common understanding among all the module coordinators. Training should be used to reflect on the facilitators' experiences in order to address problems that may emerge during facilitation. This can then be used to raise the level of learning to a higher one. Students may be encouraged to apply the knowledge and theories learnt to a practical situation. Discussions with peers can help where students are unclear about certain concepts. Thus, the use of clear simple language and code switching can assist where there is a lack in comprehension.

Although the training and support of facilitators is expensive and time-consuming, it is well worth the effort. Not only can training and support help facilitators to attain goals and keep major roles and responsibilities intact, it also provides a mechanism for measuring and communicating students' progress. Other benefits include improved DE teaching methods and learning, and better communication between module coordinators, administrative staff, facilitators and students.

The training and support of DE facilitators has some major benefits, including excellent facilitation, student achievement, and the attainment of a competitive advantage in the tight student market for DE.

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