

FACILITATOR PREPARATION, SUPPORT AND QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF STUDENT PERFORMANCE AT CONTACT SESSIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on how distance education (DE) facilitators of the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) are trained, supported and quality-assured during contact sessions to improve their facilitation skills. The argument is whether facilitators are adequately trained, quality-assured and supported to assist students studying independently in improving their performance. A further argument is whether the training, quality assurance and support of facilitators contribute to the two-way communication between students and the facilitator, and the communication of students with one another during the learning process. Ten facilitators from two provinces, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo, who were involved in the ACE Education Management Programme, were purposively sampled and interviewed using semi-structured interviews. The aim was to establish what the support structures and methods used for distance education facilitation were. Findings revealed that module coordinators had no standardised training programme or support mechanisms for the facilitators, which resulted in some facilitators being better prepared than others. These findings may contribute to designing a standardised facilitator training programme and support strategies for the improvement of facilitation and learning, as well as quality assurance at contact sessions.

Keywords: Distance education; training; support; quality assurance; contact session; facilitators; Advanced Certificate in Education.

INTRODUCTION

Distance Education (DE) in South Africa is provided by 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 – to distance education, where contact and structured opportunities for interaction between the facilitator and students are integrated into the programme design (Badat, 2005:379). The term “distance education” refers to an intentional process of teaching and learning in which physical space separates facilitators and students.

Before every contact session, a compulsory facilitators training workshop is held by the module coordinator at the University to sharpen facilitator skills and to provide support (Massyn, 2002). The module coordinators organise and plan the course and – with the assistance of the University’s administrative staff – ensure that the facilitators receive all the material timeously. At the training workshop, the coordinators are able to communicate with facilitators to solve any module-related problems they experience or foresee. All facilitators are given an opportunity to present a particular topic from the module, and the other members of the facilitation team provide constructive criticism on the presentation. This process is done in preparation for facilitation at contact sessions and for quality assurance.

In addition to excellent study material, quality assurance is a very important aspect of achieving excellence in distance education, and follows a well-planned, proactive training and support programme for facilitators. Effective distance education facilitation training should enable facilitators to adapt traditional teaching strategies to a new learning environment at contact sessions (Massyn, 2002:139). The success and quality of distance education facilitation and learning is highly dependent on a variety of factors, such as the appropriateness of the learning material and the learning theory, the design and delivery of instructions, the roles of partners in distance education, methods and strategies to increase interactivity, inquiry, facilitator mediation, operational issues and facilitators’ delivery mode (Dzakiria, 2008; Sherry, 1996; and Massyn, 2002:139). Sensitivity to the context and the socio-economic circumstances of students and their environment should result in models of best practice developed from past experience with similar groups of students (McLean, 2001).

Best practices that have been benchmarked with other students should assist institutions in designing, facilitating, training and assuring the quality of the educational process (Scardamalia, 2002:1). This should be done with the use of a triad consisting of the student, the facilitator/lecturer and the module coordinator – all of whom must function as a team (Porter, 1994). Where appropriate training exists, the level of understanding and experience of the facilitator is further enhanced through quality assurance. The facilitator may become more confident and deliver quality teaching from feedback discussions with the coordinator. In instances where facilitators have not been adequately trained, their abilities are curtailed and they find it difficult to interact with students – thus becoming fearful of interaction with students during quality assurance (Muhirwa, 2009).

Distance education students are given support by means of facilitation, peer interaction and support and the supplied materials (Garrison and Baynton, 1987). The assignments, tests and examinations that are compiled by the module coordinators are marked by the facilitators, but moderated by the module coordinator as a way of ensuring quality. The administrative personnel at the University are responsible for administrative support in terms of facilities and any other reasonable administrative need. They ensure that classrooms are available, that there is sufficient stationery and resources, and they also deal with student enquiries.

DISTANCE EDUCATION FACILITATORS/INSTRUCTORS AND THEIR FUNCTIONS

Distance education facilitators are employed on a contract basis by the University's distance education administrators and have the required qualifications to be support staff members. They are part of a team of academic staff and their role is important in that it alleviates the workload of the full-time staff members – mostly that of module coordinators – by making their jobs more manageable (Riffée, 2003:1; Scagnoli, 2001). The facilitators employed by the University of Pretoria's Distance Education Unit are teachers, heads of department, deputy principals and principals who possess a combination of training and experience that assures the required knowledge, skills and abilities for the position. Each module is presented by part-time facilitators who hold at least one advanced degree and full-time lecturers who hold master's and doctoral degrees.

The University of Pretoria's Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) study programme is a formal certificate qualification for teachers studying part-time but who are already in the teaching field. The functions of facilitators include being facilitators, organisers, graders, role models, counsellors, problem-solvers and liaison officers. The facilitators of the different modules operate as a team and travel together to contact sessions (PSU 1998, 4). Lessons are presented in three to four hours per day for five days.

FACILITATOR PREPARATION

As distance education expands in the university setting, it is imperative that module coordinators train the facilitators and examine the arrangement and facilitation of problems experienced in distance education prior to facilitators embarking on their journeys to contact sessions (Wilson, Little, Coleman & Gallagher, 1997). According to a study by Jelfs, Richardson and Price (2009), the facilitator's expertise should include effective facilitation, subject expertise and the ability to stimulate critical thinking in the students through facilitator-student interaction. This collaboration between the facilitator and the students should create a symbiotic relationship which benefits both the facilitator and the students (Calvert, 1986). Facilitators should be committed to high-quality teaching and learning in order to improve students' performance.

The appropriateness and effectiveness of distance education depends on why and how well the facilitation process is designed and delivered (Sherry, 1990). Distance education initiatives undertaken for contact session facilitation should lead to the necessary improvement of facilitator expertise as well as provide opportunities for the development and success of students (McLean, 2001; Beaudoin, 1990).

FACILITATOR SUPPORT

To enhance the distance education programme, all facilitators are provided with support in the form of a study guide, a reader and facilitation handouts or transparencies, an administration booklet, a tutorial booklet and an activity workbook for each module. The study guide contains details of all the units of the module and the content to be completed. It highlights difficult sections and makes suggestions on possible parts for self-study. The administration booklet contains important information related to the administration of the module in the programme, and the tutorial booklet explains the programme to be followed in

each module, the assignments to be completed and details of the examination. All the material is compiled by the Distance Education Unit and handed out prior to facilitator training for the contact sessions.

In practice, a compulsory facilitators' training session is held before every contact session. The module coordinator lists topics to be discussed in interactive group discussions. The coordinator then engages and interacts with facilitators as if they were students to give the facilitators a practical example of how to engage and interact with students in a face-to-face class setting. Through these workshops, facilitators experience more open, honest, transparent, and supportive group relationships and collegiality with other facilitators before going for contact sessions. The purpose of the training of facilitators by the module coordinator at the University is to sharpen facilitator skills and to provide support (Massyn, 2002). The module coordinators organise and plan the course and ensure that the facilitators receive all the material on time. This is done with the assistance of the administrative staff.

At the training workshop, the coordinators are able to meet all the facilitators immediately and solve any module-related problems with them. Furthermore, all facilitators are given the opportunity to present a particular topic from the study guide or module and the other members of the facilitation team give constructive criticism on the presentation. After the training, module coordinators and facilitators are in constant communication via telephone, email or SMS. The facilitators work through the study guide, reader, tutorial letters, facilitation handouts and workbooks. The training of facilitators on module content is continuous and occurs before facilitators go to the four contact sessions in the year: two short and two long contact sessions. The short contact session is a one-day get-together to orientate students on the module and inform them about the requirements for the assignments and the examination, while the long contact session is a week-long facilitation of module content.

During the preparation, training and support of facilitators, it is important that the module and learner characteristics and needs in the distance learning process be considered (Carnwell, 2000; Sherry, 1996). Module coordinators should not only have the capacity to prepare, train and support facilitators, but they should also invest in, or obtain, the necessary resources to do it well (McLean, 2001). Such resources include overhead projectors, flip charts, pens and data projectors.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

Training, supporting and assuring the quality of facilitators are important, as module coordinators are able to evaluate their facilitation skills and to identify strengths as well as areas for development during these activities. The module coordinator is responsible for the quality of academic content and ensures that the facilitators adapt to continuous developments in all the modules of the programme. The quality assurance of facilitators' facilitation skills is done at a different venue from that of the contact sessions by the module coordinators, who provide feedback afterwards. The purpose is to assess the facilitators' presentation skills, engagement and interaction with students, their mastery of content, their explanation of concepts and their provision of support for students. This is done by observing the lesson presentation, recording the facilitation process and having a feedback discussion with the facilitator after the lesson. Distance education students and facilitators evaluate one another after every lesson in order to identify areas that need improvement and for the module coordinator to plan future student and facilitator support.

CONTACT SESSIONS

Attendance at contact sessions is not compulsory, but approximately 90% of students do attend because the study material is unpacked and the interaction between students and the facilitator and between the students themselves encourages them to attend. Students also feel that attendance is part of what they have paid for. The numbers of students who attend contact sessions, however, vary from venue to venue. Some venues have more students than others, depending on the enrolment at the particular venue.

Facilitation and groupwork entails allocating students different roles to play in the given activities in the study material. Facilitators ensure that students know what is expected of them and they motivate and encourage them to participate – as instructed – in groups. Students are usually not very active on the first day, but as they become more familiar with the facilitator their involvement increases. To enable students to attain the set goals, facilitators are expected to make constructive suggestions where students struggle and help them improve and achieve success.

CONTEXT OF THE ACE: DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMME

Distance education contact sessions are conducted at venues at colleges, universities or schools closest to the students. There are six module coordinators and six modules in the ACE: Education Management programme. Each module coordinator is responsible for one module. The six modules are Education Management (EDM) 401 and Education Management 402, Professional and Social Context (EDS) 401 and Education Law (EDL), Organisational Management (EDO) 401 and Organisational Management 402. The modules are distributed over a period of 18 months, with six months devoted to each of the following blocks: Block 1 consists of EDM 401 and EDS 401, Block 2 is made up of EDO 401 and EDL 401; and Block 3 consists of EDM 402 and EDO 402.

Students in the distance education programme reside in all the provinces of South Africa. In each of the modules, facilitators are responsible for the contact sessions and other duties identified by the University; they facilitate in terms of their module and discipline knowledge (Massyn, 2002).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FACILITATOR SUPPORT THROUGH LESSON OBSERVATION IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

The quality assurance of the facilitation process is important and is likely to inspire student learning and positive student performance. To achieve success in performance through facilitation, a theoretical framework for understanding and improving facilitator practice is imperative. This study has used a theoretical framework based on the principles of human learning developed by the Literacy Professional Development Project (LPDP) in New Zealand. This theory uses the principles of human learning, namely training and the interaction that occurs between facilitator and students during the facilitation of lessons. The observation and quality assurance of facilitation and learning depends on the training that the facilitator receives prior to travelling to the contact session venues. The aim of quality assurance is the improvement and the provision of feedback on the facilitator's practice.

The quality assurer offers facilitation suggestions after the facilitation of the lesson in order to help the facilitators improve their practice. The suggestions given are linked to the analysis of the observed lesson. The quality assurer and the facilitators work together in identifying areas of strength and areas that need improvement.

The analysis is made in clear and simple language, so that the facilitators understand the relevance of the suggestions in terms of practice. The suggestions offered serve as a guide for facilitation and the facilitators should accept them as possible measures that may translate well into the practice context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article is the result of research that used a qualitative approach to collect data from ten participants who have particular knowledge that is most likely able to advance the study's interests and potentially open new doors (Tongco, 2007:147). The ten participants were from two provinces of South Africa, Limpopo (Tzaneen) and the Eastern Cape (East London). The sampled participants work in distance education and their knowledge and experience are related to the objectives and context of the study. All interviewed participants were males who perform facilitation in the two provinces. There were no female facilitators in the Education Management programme. Female facilitators are connected to the ACE: Special Needs programme, which was not the relevant sample for the study. The participants who were interviewed after delivery of their lessons at the contact sessions were easily accessed and they showed a willingness to participate in the study by signing consent forms (Merriam, 1998:61).

Method

Face-to-face, semi-structured and in-depth interviews were used to collect data concerning the facilitators' opinions about the training, preparation, quality assurance and support given to facilitators of distance education contact sessions. The interview questions were open-ended and multiple; varied responses were elicited from the facilitators about their experiences (Merriam, 1998:9). Each participant was interviewed for 20 to 30 minutes. Interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed.

The facilitators who were interviewed were given copies of the interview transcripts with the emerging themes to verify the accuracy of the data and its interpretation. Transcripts of the data analysis were also peer-reviewed to verify the integrity of the data. Initially, the facilitators were asked to give a brief biography of themselves and their experience with contact sessions. Informed by the purpose of the research, the following types of questions were asked:

- *Exploratory questions* that focused on the preparation and training of facilitators, their roles as facilitators at contact sessions, and their recommendations regarding training, preparation, and the facilitation and quality assurance of the contact sessions.
- *Explanatory questions* that assisted in reassessing and refining issues to interpret and frame the key findings.
- *Descriptive questions* that revealed the significance and impact of the experience of facilitating contact sessions and the success and challenges of the quality assurance process at contact sessions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:388–389).

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 following themes were identified and emerged as key findings of the study: the importance of facilitator training, preparation and support for contact sessions; assumptions held about facilitation and quality assurance of contact sessions; the importance of facilitator and student interaction during quality assurance; facilitation and quality assurance success; contextual and administrative considerations; and suggestions for the improvement of facilitation and quality assurance processes.

Some of the questions asked were the following:

- How were you trained, prepared and supported for the contact sessions?
- Do you consider training and quality assurance beneficial? Why or why not?
- What is your experience of the contact sessions?
- What are your roles with regard to student support at the contact sessions, and why? Explain.
- What challenges did you experience at the contact sessions?
- What were the successes of the contact session?
- What is your view about the quality assurance of facilitators?
- What would you recommend with regard to the contact sessions?

RESULTS

Importance of facilitator training, preparation and support for contact sessions

The facilitators who were interviewed indicated the importance and usefulness of the training, preparation and support of facilitators for the contact session. They saw it as enhancing the level of preparedness and facilitator confidence to deliver quality instruction. These are some of the participants' responses:

One can never say that he or she is familiar with the material to be presented, it is not good enough. It is good to have training because we share experiences with other presenters. You develop and grow as a presenter. (Limpopo)

Yes, definitely. We received intensive training. We discussed issues around certain units and discussed the contents of the file and all the contents of the module. (East London)

Some facilitators – recognising the importance of training and support for contact sessions – felt that they should be standardised and adequately presented so as to ensure quality and consistency during facilitation. One of the participants said:

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. (Limpopo)

Other facilitators emphasised the fact that quality assurance was important and should be continuous, since different students and different environments need different interventions. They commented as follows:

Preparation, training and quality assurance are important. You meet different students and some students are better prepared and ask more challenging questions than others. The module coordinator can pick this up and suggest strategies to the facilitator. (Limpopo)

You have to reflect, you discover new things as you go on. Extra preparation means making things easier for the students. I have to use a different approach and examples for different students to make them understand better. You have to make updates all the time. (East London)

One facilitator maintained that quality assurance was not helpful:

Money was wasted by sending them for quality assurance that does not even occur. The module coordinator came in while I was teaching. The next minute she was gone. I did not see her leave nor did she give feedback.

A further comment was:

Whether module coordinators know exactly what has to be done is also questionable. To spend less than one hour listening to a facilitator, for me it is not sufficient. I think the module coordinator needs to sit in and give feedback and support. (East London)

All facilitators agreed that quality assurance should be continuous, standardised and well designed, despite some facilitators having been in the programme for a long time. Quality assurance cannot be underestimated, because it empowers and gives the facilitators confidence to interact with students and the facilitators' abilities are improved. Facilitators who are inadequately trained and supported are insecure and struggle to interact with students.

The criteria used for quality assurance should be explained to facilitators in order to be better prepared in terms of outcomes that should be realised. It is also important to be successfully rated through quality assurance by the module coordinator.

Assumptions about facilitation and quality assurance of contact sessions

The module coordinators initially assumed that facilitation of distance education was going to be difficult since, some ACE facilitators were newly appointed. They thought the facilitators would struggle with facilitation skills and would not be well prepared. One facilitator had this to say about his experience of quality assurance at contact sessions:

In my first contact session I thought that I would struggle with students who are highly intelligent, but I did not experience that. I then realised that I did a lot to help our students. I said to myself, "I am learning some skills that I did not have before." (Limpopo)

Another facilitator, however, indicated the importance of assuring the quality of facilitators who were new to the work and emphasised that it was not only experience that counted. He commented:

I think too much emphasis is placed on people's qualifications without really looking at whether they are able to facilitate at the contact session in such a short space of time, and how they are unpacking the content. I think people must be quality-assured or asked to present a certain aspect or a portion of the work in order to make a judgment. I think the training alone is not beneficial, given the way some new facilitators teach. (East London)

All facilitators initially had some fears about their teaching strategies and the comments they would get from the module coordinator. They soon realised that students came to contact sessions unprepared. What makes facilitation a challenge is when there is no training, preparation and support before the contact session. Students need to see that the facilitator meets them halfway and that they only become successful after the contact sessions.

The importance of facilitator and student interaction during quality assurance

The facilitators follow guidelines provided during their training in facilitating distance education students at contact sessions. These include the explanation of concepts and activities to be carried out, student guidance, group discussions and the provision of feedback. Facilitation is slowed down when facilitators struggle to engage students due to a lack of preparation; the facilitator has to resort to lecturing without getting feedback from the participants. It has become apparent to the module coordinator that the students struggle to understand the lessons. This is what one of the facilitators said about quality assurance and student expectations at contact sessions:

We get an opportunity to explain in different ways so that they understand. I would expect the module coordinator to give feedback about facilitation and student participation and involvement after sitting through a facilitation process. (Limpopo)

These findings are in line with what Hilary Perraton (1988) says when she maintains that the role of the distance education facilitator – when she meets the

distance students face to face – is to become a facilitator of learning, rather than a communicator of a fixed body of information. The learning process should proceed as knowledge building among facilitator and students through the quality assurance of the facilitation process. From the relevant theory and the practical skills and competencies of the module coordinator, meaningful suggestions should be made to the facilitator during a feedback session. Facilitators become concerned about whether students will pass the modules they facilitate if they are not supported in their facilitation and in their engagement with the students.

Facilitation and quality assurance success: contextual and administrative considerations

When asked about the successes attained through their facilitation and quality assurance of distance education students at the contact session, the following response was given:

I think the success of contact sessions is helping students succeed. We learn a lot in terms of the difficulties and hardships the students experience as well as some of their challenges when given support in areas of weakness, so that when next time we present we consider the input and we improve. (Limpopo)

A further response raised concerns about some of the challenges faced outside the facilitation process:

Other challenges are in terms of administration. Irrespective of how much we try to avoid them, they still crop up. Sometimes you are morally discouraged. The students come to you with problems of not having received materials. We understand that we do not have to give them the material that we use but your morality will talk to you and you think of how best to help them. (East London)

Most participants interviewed have experienced success in their facilitation of contact sessions. Students usually call them or come to them at contact sessions to express their gratitude for the success they have attained from the support and facilitation received at the contact session. The facilitators appreciated having been given the opportunity to visit so many provinces in order to make a difference to students. However, the slow and unreliable postal system, little and unreliable telephone communication, the lack of electrification, poor road conditions, and

few and inadequate libraries and other public facilities for studying hamper the performance of distance education students. Distance education contact services should provide both instruction and support services, which include developing and implementing effective student communication systems and the necessary learning requirements.

These findings are consistent with Garrison's report (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), which suggests that the quality and integrity of the educational process depends on sustained, two-way communication and the provision of adequate facilities and resources beforehand. The purpose of the contact session is to allow students faster and better access to services because when they access services better, they learn better and this also improves facilitation. However, Geidt (1996:16–19) has identified significant practical challenges for distance education, such as the social and economic status of some disadvantaged communities in South Africa that make it difficult for facilitators to succeed in their facilitation of contact sessions. He also emphasises the fact that students need to be prepared beforehand, but since the written texts are not in the students' home language, facilitators have difficulty in accustoming students to critically interpret textual messages in English.

Garrison (1990), in support of Geidt (1996), indicates the importance of two-way communication for quality and the integrity of the educational process. Without connectivity, like communication with the administration staff, the facilitators and module coordinators, distance learning will degenerate into the old correspondence course model of independent study. Students may become dependent and isolated, they procrastinate and eventually drop out of the course. This finding reinforces the fact that distance education models and practices should be adapted to the social, cultural, economic and political circumstances of the students and their environment.

Suggestions for improvement in the facilitation and quality assurance processes

When asking the facilitators for recommendations on the development of the distance education programme, the responses included the following:

I think the classes that we are conducting are too long. I think 3½ hours is a bit too long for one class. If they can reduce the time maybe it will be more efficient. (Eastern Cape)

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 data projectors, to make sure students take more in. (Limpopo)

In the case of distance education, Geidt (1996:19–20), in line with what UP does, suggests that a substantial component of face-to-face support is essential, especially from community-based tutors. What is lacking at UP, however, is community learning centres and regional study centres. Even though students have extra support in the form of community-based tutors (McLean 2001), successful distance education systems should involve interactivity between the facilitator and students, between students and the learning environment, and among students themselves. There should also be active learning in the classroom during the contact sessions (Sherry 1996).

IMPLICATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Interviews conducted during the research show that training is imperative every time contact sessions take place. Facilitation at each contact session is different, because different students come for support at the different venues. Facilitators can never say that they are completely familiar with the material to be presented. Training has to be continuous, so that facilitators can share their experiences with other presenters and develop personally as facilitators. Extra preparation means making things easier for the facilitators and it improves their understanding of course content and how to use the available technology successfully. Experienced facilitators may be used to facilitate if there is a new facilitator in the programme. If facilitation is never practically demonstrated, new presenters may lose confidence in the module coordinator.

With regard to expectations of facilitators, the findings reveal that there were few students who were prepared or who asked challenging questions at the contact sessions. This indicates that facilitators need to prepare in order to encourage students to interact at contact sessions. Facilitators should not assume that most students can study on their own; they should realise that students will always need to be encouraged to be disciplined in their self-study. Facilitators try their best to make it easier for students to understand the material and to pass the examination. The facilitators' guidance and passion for facilitation are more important than their

having high qualifications. The recommendation is that facilitators should undergo quality assurance, and if found lacking, be supported or dismissed.

The findings from the interviews with the facilitators about their successes in facilitation include the fact that facilitators are able to reach out to many students in the different provinces who want to better themselves. The knowledge they gain from their interaction with students helps facilitators to improve their understanding of the students and to develop strategies to address the students' problems. Another finding is how delighted students are with facilitators who help them achieve success.

With regard to the challenges of facilitation and the quality assurance process, the administration of student affairs is seen as a deterrent in achieving success. Despite knowing that they are tasked to only facilitate students, it is not easy for facilitators to disregard students' administration problems. The distances to the venues affect facilitation, because the students are adults who travel far and start out very early in the morning. The long journey affects their participation, because they are tired by the time they arrive at the contact sessions. Language is another concern that was raised because some English education terms cannot be explained in code-switching if the facilitator does not speak the students' home language. Coordinators of distance education also have to be sensitive to the context and the socio-economic circumstances of students and their environment in order to develop models of best practice for contact sessions. Facilitators recommended that the ACE: DE programme's contact session time be reduced in line with that of the BEd programme for distance education. Further recommendations were that presentations be done through the use of improved technology.

BEST PRACTICE AND LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT FACILITATOR SUPPORT FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION

In designing effective distance education, the goals, needs and characteristics of teachers and students – as well as content requirements and technical constraints – should be taken into consideration. If unusual delivery systems are required, they must be made accessible to all participants. The theoretical basis on which facilitation models are based, affects not only the way in which information is communicated by the facilitator to the student, but also the way in which the student makes sense of, and constructs new knowledge from the information that is presented. Distance

education systems involve a high degree of interactivity between the facilitator and the student, particularly in rural and isolated communities separated by thousands of kilometres.

Although technology is an integral part of distance education, any successful programme should focus on the instructional needs of the students, rather than on the technology. It is essential to consider students' ages, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, interests and experiences, educational levels and familiarity with distance education methods and delivery systems (Schamber 1988). Facilitators are of the opinion that attendance at distance learning venues far outweighs the lack of student preparation, because contact sessions offer considerable dialogue during face-to-face interaction (McNabb, 1994). Interactivity takes many forms; it is not only limited to facilitator-student interaction, but also establishes the connectivity the students feel with the distance teacher, the local tutors and their peers. In addition, infrastructural challenges and the previous school experiences of most students, such as rote learning, are important. These challenges make it difficult for students to develop independently and critically. There is also a large cultural and linguistic diversity and, as a result of this, many students may have difficulty with the language and culture of the standardised facilitation material. Geidt (1996:14–15) concludes that the preparation and training of facilitators of distance education contact sessions can only be effective when the delivery system and the curriculum are appropriately matched to the social and political context of the students.

CONCLUSION

The facilitation of contact sessions demands thorough training, preparation and support for the facilitators to produce successful students. Facilitators are required to assist contact students and to facilitate interaction among students. They should also assess group discussions and provide assistance with questions asked or discussions held during the contact sessions (Willis, 1993).

The strategies that are effective in distance learning are developing appropriate methods of feedback and reinforcement, optimising content and pace, adapting to different student learning styles, and using case studies and examples that are relevant to the target audience. Being concise and supplementing course content with printed handouts and personalised instruction also benefits the students.



The facilitators agree that the University of Pretoria's Distance Education Unit provides them with certain unique opportunities, like travelling to the different provinces of South Africa, both inland and along the coastal areas. They enjoy the working holiday, staying in hotels and guest houses. However, care should be taken not to focus too readily and eagerly on the rewards and forget about some of the shortcomings. These attitudes are greatly varied among institutions and individuals, but seem to be more positive when certain motivational conditions are present.

The findings from the study suggest that, although the study has drawn on a similar pool of staff members who work in the same programme, albeit in different modules, they appear to have undergone different methods of training. The implication of this finding is that the training, support and quality assurance of facilitators – though expensive and time-consuming – is well worth the effort. Not only can training and support help to attain goals and reinforce major roles and responsibilities, but they also provide a mechanism for measuring and communicating the students' progress. Other benefits include improved distance education teaching methods and learning, a significant increase in course completion rates and better communication among and between the module coordinators, the administration staff, facilitators and students.

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