Malaysian Journal of Distance Education 7 (2), 79-91 (2005)

Enhancing Regional Distance Learning Collaboration Through Human Resource Development

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Abstract

This article reports on the collaborative effort undertaken by two prominent regional distance learning institutions, namely School of Distance Education (SDE), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Malaysia, and the SEAMEO Regional Open Learning Centre (SEAMOLEC), Indonesia, to enhance human resource development through regional cooperation in distance education. An International Training Workshop on Self-Learning Materials Development was jointly conducted in Penang for duration of 10 days, attracting 18 participants. Traditionally, this training workshop has always been conducted in Jakarta, Indonesia. The objectives of the collaborative effort were to sensitise and advocate the need to improve the quality of open and distance learning practices in ASEAN countries, facilitate the sharing of peer-based learning among the participants based on their experiences and best practices and provide the participants with the know-how and skills to write self-learning materials in the support of distance learning programmes in their respective countries. Participants were given an elaborate end-of-workshop assessment instrument adapted from the Improving Training Quality (ITQ) to evaluate the collaborative planning, management and organisation of the workshop. The findings revealed that in general, the participants felt that the workshop was extremely beneficial to them, providing them with a new kind of "total" learning experience and creating a high degree of enhancement in the understanding and applications of the core concepts and the inputs – which were of a high quality – that were rendered by the trainers, facilitators and peers. The collaborative management and organisation of the workshop were

perceived by the participants to be very satisfactory while the organising staff was friendly, responsive and skilful in their knowledge and approach. The success and benefits of this historic collaborative effort should pave the way for continuing collaborative activities that would enhance and promote distance learning in this region. This paper also highlighted the mechanisms for the continuous enhancement of future collaborations.

Abstrak

Artikel ini melaporkan usaha kolaboratif yang diambil oleh dua institusi Pendidikan Jarak Jauh serantau yang terkenal iaitu Pusat Pengajian Pendidikan Jarak Jauh (PPPJJ), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Malaysia dan SEAMEO Regional Open Learning Centre (SEAMOLEC), Indonesia untuk mempertingkatkan pembangunan sumber manusia melalui kerjasama serantau dalam Pendidikan Jarak Jauh. Bengkel Antarabangsa Pembangunan Bahan Pembelajaran Kendiri telah diusahakan secara bersama di Pulau Pinang selama 10 hari dan telah menarik seramai 18 orang peserta. Secara tradisinya bengkel ini hanya dilaksanakan di Jakarta Indonesia. Objektif usaha kolaborasi untuk mempertingkatkan kualiti praktis Pendidikan Jarak Jauh dan Terbuka di kalangan negara ASEAN, memudahcara perkongsian pembelajaran berasaskan rakan di kalangan peserta berasaskan pengalaman dan praktis terbaik dan menyediakan peserta dengan kemahiran dan pengetahuan untuk menulis bahan pembelajaran kendiri dalam menyokong program Pendidikan Jarak Jauh di negara masing-masing. Peserta diberikan satu instrumen penilaian di akhir bengkel dan diadaptasikan daripada *Improving Training Quality (ITQ)* untuk menilai perancangan kolaboratif, pengurusan dan penganjuran bengkel. Dapatan menunjukkan secara umum peserta merasakan bengkel amat berguna kepada mereka, memberi mereka pengalaman pembelajaran yang baru dan menghasilkan peningkatan yang tinggi terhadap kefahaman dan konsep asas. Pengurusan kolaboratif dan penganjuran bengkel dirasakan oleh peserta sebagai amat memuaskan manakala staf penganjur adalah mesra dan berkemahiran dalam pengetahuan dan pendekatan. Kejayaan dan juga manfaat usaha kolaboratif yang bersejarah ini sepatutnya memberi laluan kepada aktiviti kolaboratif berterusan yang boleh meningkatkan Pendidikan Jarak Jauh di rantau ini. Kertas kerja ini juga menekankan kepada mekanisma untuk peningkatan berterusan kerjasama di masa hadapan.

Introduction

Regional collaboration may be defined as shared commitment and investment by universities, colleges, countries and districts in the same geographic area to use all available resources (fiscal and academic), organisational capacity and political potential to achieve commonly held goals (CCSESA, 2002). In distance education, the demand for regional collaboration arises because of the scope and nature of the challenges faced by the regional distance education institutions. The challenges facing any single distance education institution are complex and multi-dimensional. As a point of fact, the educational assets that any single institution can bring to meet these challenges is likely to be inadequate given the complexity, scope and deeply entrenched nature of distance education. Moreover, the most basic element of any strategy to improve the quality of a distance education institution is a collaborative approach. Improvement can encompass the development of highly competent course manager/designers, strengthening curricula and improving graduate quality, raising expectations and establishing data-driven accountability and decision-making systems (Thach & Murphy, 1996).

The demand for regional collaboration also arises from the mutual benefits that can accrue from such initiatives. Taylor & Sharma (1990) reported that the regional collaboration in distance education in South Asia involving seven countries – Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka with the combined population of approximately one billion (1/5 of the world population) – would be the only viable way to provide adequate resources, both human and physical, to meet the escalating demand for education and training; at the same time, it has the potential to bring the masses of South Asia into the twenty-first century. The collaborative initiatives are capable of delineating many commonalities among countries especially in the outstanding human resource development needs (Mason, 1994). The regional collaboration also provides a mechanism for facilitating cooperative ventures in sharing expertise and resources that can optimise potential economies of scale; the cost benefits accrued from educational expenditure can be significantly enhanced – affecting not only the lowering of costs per student but also in terms of effectiveness through the enhancement of instructional quality (Taylor & Sharma, 1990).

In distance learning, the effective design of self-learning materials represents the cornerstone of any sound educational course delivery. The effectiveness of the delivery of course materials is governed by many factors but none is as important as properly designed instructional materials that take into account the theory of distance and adult learning as well as the incorporation of the communicative, graphical and illustrative features that promote self-directed and active learning.

Any collaborative endeavour of distance learning institutions must give substantial focus to the improvement of designing course materials through human resource development. Each participating institution can contribute significantly to this imperative. Expertise, experience and resources related to professional development abound; the issue is how to coordinate and focus these assets and resources among participating institutions systematically in order to render optimal benefits to the course managers especially those who are new in the delivery of course materials via distance learning.

In order to gauge the collaborative endeavours among the participating institutions in the training and development of human resources in a systematic manner, an evaluation instrument from the Improving Training Quality (ITQ) was used. The ITQ is an innovative training workshop undertaken by the World Bank with partners in South East Asia; it offers a collaborative learning opportunity for senior trainers to study and work together in order to improve their mastery of innovative training design (Yassin & Abdullah, 2002). The project has resulted in the various designs of evaluation instruments that measure the organisational ability of participants as well as their competency in the instructional design, teaching and learning skills and the innovative application of computer-assisted technologies and Internet web-based networking. As our study involved looking at the collaborative organisation of the training workshop for self-learning materials development in distance education, we felt that it was appropriate that the evaluation instrument from the ITQ was adapted for the purpose of assessing and evaluating the approach adopted in the organisation and conduct of this workshop.

The objectives of this study were, therefore, to look at the extent of the success or set-backs, if any, of these collaborative endeavours undertaken by the School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)

and the South East Asia Minister of Education Organisation (SEAMEO) Open Learning Centre (SEAMOLEC), Jakarta Indonesia, in organising the International Training Workshop on Self-Learning Materials Development. The success and benefits of this collaborative effort should pave the way for continuing collaborative activities to enhance and promote distance learning in this region. The study also delineated the factors related to the organisation of the workshop as well as the appropriateness, quality and logistical aspects of the workshop. This information should help the participating institutions with some continuous improvement mechanisms for future collaborations.

The Collaboration

This study involved analysing the regional collaboration in distance learning that was conducted via the Joint Training Collaboration – School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and South East Asia Minister of Education Organisation (SEAMEO) Open Learning Centre (SEAMOLEC), Jakarta, Indonesia. The joint training was held on the 1-12 July 2002 at the Univeristi Sains Malaysia, Malaysia. The training course conducted in USM was similar to the courses that have been conducted in Jakarta, Indonesia, at SEAMOLEC.

SEAMOLEC supplied the same training materials used in Jakarta. It contains 11 modules and is shown in Table 1. The organising committee in USM was formed under the auspices of the office of Continuing Education in the School of Distance Education. This committee prepared the brochure which was modelled after the ITQ format and it was sent to Jakarta (hard and soft copies) for dissemination to SEAMEO member countries through the SEAMEO channel. USM marketed the course within Malaysia to all the institutions of higher learning and selected teacher colleges. The trainers/facilitators comprised experts from SEAMOLEC (3) and USM (6). This training workshop also acted as training and capacity building for the six trainers from USM and international outreach for the trainers from SEAMOLEC.

Table 1 Modules for International Training Workshop on Self-Learning Materials Development

Module 1 (M1)	Principles of Distance Learning (2 sets)
Module 2 (M2)	Independent Learning: The Concept and Application of the ODL System.
Module 3 (M3)	Adult Learning
Module 4 (M4)	Development of Content Outlines (2 sets)
Module 5 (M5)	Self-Learning Materials: The Concept and Format
Module 6 (M6)	Communicative Language in Modules
Module 7 (M7)	Promoting Active Learning
Module 8 (M8)	Graphics and Illustration
Module 9 (M9)	Learning Assessment in Self-Learning Materials
Module 10 (M10)	Test Construction: Writing Items for Self-Learning Materials
Module 11 (M11)	Evaluation of Self-Learning Materials

The training materials for the workshop were developed in the self-learning materials format. Therefore, all the training materials could be used as models of the self-learning materials that each participant could utilise to produce his/her own work. Training activities included presentations, discussions, individual and group assignments, individual practices and consultations. The training course attracted 18 fee-paying participants from Indonesia and Malaysia. The participants satisfactorily completed all the training workshop activities and assignments and each received a training workshop completion certificate.

Research Methodology

An end-of-workshop evaluation questionnaire developed for this study was adapted from the ITQ course completion questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of five categories namely the quality of inputs, assessing the learning situation, quality of learning activities/discussions and the logistics and organisation. Each statement was accompanied by a Likert Scale ranging from 1-5, where 1 denoted very poor/minimal and 5 denoted excellent/exceeded expectations.

The questionnaire was distributed to the participants at the end of the workshop. All the 18 participants who attended the workshop returned the questionnaire. An analysis of the questionnaire was performed using a standard statistical package and it involved extracting the means of

responses from the participants. A mean score lower than 3.00 indicated the degree of disagreement of the participants towards the statements put forward to them, whereas the mean score higher than 3.00 indicated the degree of agreement with the statements.

Results and Discussion

Table 2 shows the results of the analysis of input quality in terms of ideas, know-how and contributions of the facilitator and peers at the workshop. In general, all the statements received favourable responses from the respondents with every mean score achieved being higher than 3.00. The participants felt that the organising committee of the workshop had successfully fulfilled the needs of the participants in terms of the logistics support and personal services it offered, $\bar{x} = 4.07$. The logistical aspects pertinent to administrative support that include the arrangements for food, accommodation, travelling, setting the schedule of events and clerical support are imperative to the success of the organisation of a training workshop (MAHR, 2003).

The participants also felt that in the light of their own learning objectives, the workshop had provided them with adequate learning experiences, $\bar{x} = 3.87$, whereas the trainers had provided them with adequate customer services and satisfaction, $\bar{x} = 3.80$. It is expected of the trainers that, apart from being expert in the subject matter discussed and possessing the ability of using the interactive teaching methods, they must also have the ability to establish an informal, warm and supportive atmosphere using a relaxed approach; at the same time, they have to be capable of handling participant resistance and denial and dealing with high charged emotional issues (MAHR, 2003). In terms of the quality of the inputs provided to them, the participants felt that their peers, $\bar{x} = 3.73$, personal trainers $\bar{x} = 3.67$, workshop facilitators $\bar{x} = 3.53$ had all provided them with inputs of satisfactory adequate quality.

Table 2 Overall Perceptions of the Self-Learning Materials Development Training Workshop

	Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.	In the light of your own learning objectives, how would you rate the training workshop as a whole in providing you with a "total" learning experience?	15	3.87	0.74
2.	How would you rate the workshop trainers/ facilitators in terms of having provided you with "customer services and satisfaction"?	15	3.80	1.08
3.	How would you rate the workshop organising committee staff in terms of having provided you with logistic support and personal services?	14	4.07	0.92
4.	The quality of inputs provided by the workshop trainers/facilitators.	15	3.53	0.74
5.	The quality of the inputs provided by your personal trainer, if applicable.	9	3.67	0.50
6.	The quality of the inputs contributed by your peers.	15	3.73	0.46

The rating of the appropriateness and the quality of each of the workshop sessions is shown in Table 3. As indicated, almost all the workshop sessions recorded mean scores higher than 3.00, an indication of the positive perception among the respondents. Various aspects of the workshops that included the role played by the trainers and the delivery mechanism used, the self-assessing mechanism employed and the comprehensive range of modules made available by SEAMOLEC might have been the contributing factors leading to the positive responses recorded.

Table 3 The Appropriateness and Quality of the Workshop Sessions and Discussions

	Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.	Module 1: Principles of Distance Learning	15	4.00	0.76
2.	Module 2: Independent Learning: The Concept and Application of the ODL System	15	4.00	0.65
3.	Module 3: Adult Learning	15	3.80	0.77
4.	Module 4: Development of Content Outlines	15	3.93	0.80
5.	Module 5: Self-Materials: The Concepts and Format of Learning	15	3.87	0.74
6.	Module 6: Communicative Language in Modules	15	3.67	1.05
7.	Module 7: Promoting Active Learning	14	4.00	0.78
8.	Module 8: Graphics and Illustration	15	4.00	0.76
9.	Module 9: Learning Assessment in Self-Learning Materials	15	3.73	1.03
10.	Module 10: Test Construction: Writing Items for Self-Learning Materials	15	4.13	0.64
11.	Module 11: Evaluation of Self-Learning Materials	15	4.00	0.53

The extent of preparation by the trainers before the workshop and the role they play during the workshop are crucial to ensure that the quality of the workshop sessions is of a high level. Before the sessions, the trainers should outline the objectives of the training session, the course methodology and define what was expected with regards to the course. During the sessions, the trainers have to encourage active group participation among participants, use visual aids, handouts, flipcharts with textual graphics, charts, maps, films, videotapes, audio- visual equipment as well as hypothetical examples to help to illustrate points more clearly and adhere to the time limits and to the assigned topics (SVAW, 2003).

The quality of the workshop sessions was perceived to be high by the respondents who likewise attributed a similar opinion about the innovative self-assessing and peer-learning mechanism deployed at each of the sessions. Each session incorporated assignments/projects that required the participants to work collectively in small groups and present their assignments/projects at the conclusion of each of the sessions. Learning

resources in the form of books, journals and Internet facilities were made available at the specially set-up workshop resource room. The collaborative group format of training has been proven to be very successful in professional development in distance education as it promotes interaction, experience sharing and opportunities to practise the new self-learning concepts and principles that further improve and enrich the knowledge construction (Bernath & Rubin, 2001).

The high level of appropriateness and quality of the workshop sessions was also attributed to the quality and range of learning materials made available by SEAMOLEC. The learning materials were designed to promote active learning which was self-directed, highly graphical and illustrative to describe the important concepts and principles. The trainers provided by SEAMOLEC and USM demonstrated their calibre and experience; their utilisation of appropriate learning methods made the training more engaging and this further enhanced the learning outcomes. These positive findings were a testimony of the benefit and impact yielded in the collaborative endeavours undertaken by both institutions in professional development in distance education.

The findings on the logistical and organisational aspects of the workshop are shown in Table 4. As a whole, most of the logistical and the organisational aspects of the workshop received favourable responses from the respondents. The respondents were extremely satisfied with the response time of the workshop organisers when they made requests for any assistance during the workshop ($\overline{x} = 4.50$) as well as on the average response time following their dispatch of e-mail/faxed messages or inquiries prior to coming to Penang ($\overline{x} = 4.40$). Generally, they were very satisfied with the logistical assistance received ($\overline{x} = 4.07$) and felt that the workshop had established personal networking opportunities ($\overline{x} = 4.07$) with good social and cultural activities ($\overline{x} = 4.07$) being organised for them.

Table 4 Responses to Logistical and Organisational Aspects of Workshop

Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Workshop seating and classroom arrangements.	15	3.67	0.90
2. Workshop audio-visual aids and facilities	15	3.87	0.92
3. Workshop discussion format.	15	3.73	0.88
4. Workshop computer laboratory facilities and computer equipment.	15	3.40	1.12
5. Online virtual/Internet connection facilities	15	3.67	1.05
6. Personal computer hardware and software installation, configuration and technical support.	14	3.71	0.83
7. Accommodation facilities/arrangements.	12	4.00	0.60
8. Refreshments and snacks during coffee breaks	15	3.67	0.90
9. Food quality and related services	15	3.87	0.74
10. Individual travel arrangements	12	3.75	0.87
11. Informal learning facilities and personal networking opportunities	15	4.07	0.59
12. Social and cultural activities	15	4.07	0.80
13. Logistical assistance from workshop organising staff	15	4.07	0.59
14. Personal rating of the overall organisation of the workshop	15	3.80	0.86
15. Length of average response time of the workshop organisers to e-mail/faxed messages or inquiries made prior to arrival in Penang	10	4.40	0.70
16. Quality and treatment of responses from the workshop organisers to e-mail/faxed messages or inquiries	12	3.58	0.79
17. Length of the average response time of the workshop organisers following requests for any assistance during the workshop	14	4.50	0.52
18. Quality and treatment response from the workshop organisers to requests for assistance during the workshop	14	3.64	0.63

The participants were also satisfied with the seating arrangements ($\overline{x} = 3.67$) and other workshop facilities rendered to them such as the audio-visual facilities ($\overline{x} = 3.87$). Internet and virtual connection facilities

($\overline{x} = 3.67$) and technical support ($\overline{x} = 3.71$). However, the provision of computer laboratory facilities and computer equipment recorded the lowest mean score ($\overline{x} = 3.40$). This is the area that necessitates improvement in the planning of any subsequent collaborative training workshop. Although the venue for the workshop was ideal for the training as it was equipped with a sufficient number of online connections, some difficulties were encountered in obtaining adequate computers for the use of participants. Coordination with various departments in USM especially with the Computer Centre and the Information and Communication Technology Unit could be strengthened and coordinated for future collaborations.

Summary

This article reports on the study undertaken to evaluate the outcomes of the collaborative training workshop organised by USM, Penang, and SEAMOLEC, Jakarta, in an effort to enhance the regional collaboration in distance education. The evaluation was made by utilising the questionnaire adapted from the ITQ end-of-workshop assessment instrument. The analysis revealed that the collaborative endeavor resulted in positive responses from the participants in the aspects pertinent to the quality of inputs, the appropriateness and quality of the workshop, its logistics and organisation. The positive evaluation should pave the way to more collaborative efforts between the two institutions in areas which have not hitherto been explored. Such continuous commitments should benefit the two institutions and enable them to establish and sustain the regional lead in the field of distance education.

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