

Project approach for capacity building of ODL practitioners

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ABSTRACT

Open Distance Learning (ODL) is serving as an effective mode of delivery of education to unreached aspirants of education. This mode is now widely accepted and recognized as valuable asset for the dissemination of knowledge and increasing literacy in the state in efficient way. ODL is expanding faster in the developing world. The Governments in these countries have laid significant thrust on ODL, linking this to national development priorities. Within ODL, Open Basic Education assumes considerable significance in the context of: millions of students being outside the purview of schooling; high dropout rate especially at the primary and elementary levels; and linkage of basic education to functionality and skill development.

With expansion and wider use of ODL delivery mechanisms, a continuous need is felt for capacity building of the practitioners and the developers. It is envisaged that these groups shall need faster and sustainable inputs through training and retraining in the curriculum designing and development. The impact of short orientation programmes without much measurable outcomes found not to be lasting long. Thus a Project based approach is devised by introducing workshop series for the practitioners of ODL by a mix of online support, face-to-face workshop, online follow-up support, and repeat of the cycle in the next phase(s).

This approach is being tested for capacity building of ODL material designers and developers of Bangladesh Open University (BOU) with support provided by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and expertise provided by the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). This paper will share the experiences earned in development of strategies, strengths, expected outcomes and bottlenecks for the benefit of trainers in the field.

Keywords: Capacity building, open and distance learning, collaborative learning, wiki educator

The Open and Distance Learning (ODL) System has already proved its capacities in addressing the needs of knowledge seekers, search for skills and opportunities

for continuing education. As the ODL system grow, the need for training and retraining for its practitioners are envisaged, particularly with advent of newer technologies and its usage in ODL. It is also important to re-visit the strategies of course development and to enhance the capacities by adding dimensions that emerged from the learning centric research on learning behaviors and learning styles. Learners have different ways of learning. When the learning style of a student does not match with the teaching style in an educational environment, learners may have problems in learning

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(Felder and Silverman, 1988). The content software will have direct impact on the teaching-learning as the students behaves in relation to their learning and would have an impact on how well they perform (Biggs, 2001).

Within ODL, Open Basic Education assumes considerable significance in the context of: millions of students being outside the purview of schooling; high dropout rate especially at the primary and elementary levels; and linkage of basic education to functionality and skill development. In the South-east Asian region, Bangladesh had also taken steps to establish the Bangladesh Open University (BOU) with an Open School (OS). The faculty of OS has been engaged in course development for school education and is using various models of instructional design.

Over the period, there was a felt institutional need to orient the faculty of the Open School in Bangladesh for strengthening them further in terms of continuing professional development. A series of training workshops were envisaged on self-learning materials (SLM) development, assessment and evaluation, tutoring and counselling, multimedia and online learning, research training, etc. The first one identified was the design and development of self-learning materials (SLMs) so that the quality of learning inputs are considerably enhanced. Indira Gandhi National Open University, as the system leader, having a cumulative student enrolment of 1.8 million and presence in 32 countries, was entrusted with the responsibility of organizing training on SLM development, as a priority. The workshop series for a batch of 25 faculty's and staff was proposed to be undertaken with a mix of online support, face-to-face workshop, online follow-up support, and repeat of the cycle in the next phase(s) with support provided by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and expertise provided by IGNOU. Based on the experience of staff training for sustained outcomes, IGNOU devised a model, Project based approach for the training of faculty at Open School, Bangladesh.

Capacity Building

"Capacity" on the other hand refers to maximum amount that can be contained. Thus, capacity building refers to an activity that leads to realization of maxima.

In the context of this paper, capacity building of ODL practitioners means realization of maxima in case of people involved in ODL in the region who would further train people and thus, there will be a multiplicative effect in terms of growth.

There are several works on the capacity building of the ODL practitioners. One such example is the project "Capacity Building of ODL practitioners" of Southern African Development Community- Distance Education Centre (SADC-DEC). The objective of the project was to contribute to regional integration through the development and deployment of effective ODL in the Southern African Region. The whole project revolves around offer of Postgraduate Diploma in Distance Education offered at IGNOU having an academic duration of one year. The capacities are building through the programme, interactive sessions and online support. There are many examples of COL, UNESCO, World Bank initiatives aimed at enhancing capacity and capability of organizations (and human resources) to achieve greater impact in the arena of operations.

The main thought process was to have sustainable outcomes and effective embedded orientation of the faculty identified as participants with judicious expenditure.

Objectives of the Project

The project has envisaged that practitioners would understand the theories and practices of Open and DE systems and practices; formulate strategies for curriculum development; demonstrate acquaintance with principles and characteristics of Self Learning Materials (SLMs); demonstrate skills for writing SLM's; analyze the interrelation between SLM and other support material/media such as – A/V programmes, counselling, continues assessment through assignments, etc.

Methodology

The Project had a judicious mix of online support and Face-to-Face (F2F) workshops for the capacity building of the participants. The project commenced with development of Training pages on WikiEducator (www.wikieducator.org/OPEN_SCHOOL%2CBANGLADESH). WikiEducator was used as a

collaborative development platform along with Google Groups for enhance interactivity through discussions.

The Main Project page was subdivided in to multiple links as described under:

Introduction

A brief introduction was provided on the Open and Distance Learning to the participants to get exposed to the basic philosophy and to gear up for training programme. It read:

“Open Distance Learning (ODL) is expanding faster in the developing world, and especially in the South Asian Region. The Governments in these countries have laid significant thrust on ODL, linking this to national development priorities. Within ODL, *Open Basic Education* assumes considerable significance in the context of

- ❑ millions of students being outside the purview of schooling;
- ❑ high dropout rate especially at the primary and elementary levels; and
- ❑ linkage of basic education to functionality and skill development.

In the region, Bangladesh had also taken steps to establish the Bangladesh Open University (BOU) with an Open School (OS) within the BOU with support provided by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and expertise provided by the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU).

Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is involved in promoting ODL systems in the Commonwealth through capacity building, networking etc. COL and IGNOU have been working closely for the last two decades in spreading the ODL systems in various sectors in many commonwealth nations. In continuation to this, and as a felt institutional need, the Open School in Bangladesh needs to be strengthened further in terms of continuing professional development of its faculty and staff on especially the design and development of self-learning materials (SLMs) so that the quality of learning inputs is considerably enhanced. IGNOU, as the system leader in the region, with a cumulative enrolment of 1.5 million students and presence in 36 countries, could be entrusted

the responsibility of organizing a series of workshops on Self Learning Materials Development (SLMD), Assessment and Evaluation, Tutoring and Counselling, Multimedia and Online Learning, Research Training, among others. As a priority, the series for SLMD may be taken up at the first instance. The workshop series for a batch of 25 faculty's and staff is proposed to be undertaken with a mix of online support, face-to-face workshop, online follow-up support, and repeat of the cycle in the next phase(s).”

Objectives of the Workshop(s)

The specific objectives of the workshops were:

- ❑ to familiarize the participants with theories and practices of opens and DE systems and practices;
- ❑ to formulate strategies for curriculum development;
- ❑ to acquaint the participants with principles and characteristics of Self Learning Materials (SLMs);
- ❑ to develop skills of writing SLM's among the participants;
- ❑ to analyze the interrelation between SLM and other support material/ media such as – A/V programmes, counselling, continues assessment through assignments , etc.

Participants

List of participants that varied from time to time and an update as per the responses from the participants on various aspect carried out on actual basis, available at (www.wikieducator.org/DETAILS_OF_PARTICIPANTS)

A Google group was created for discussions and as group emailing system to synergize the participants and to provide them opportunity to interact with mentors/ Resource persons.(<http://groups.google.com/group/BOUS>).

Outcomes

At the end of the first F2F Workshop and online follow-up, each participant came out with a draft SLM unit

on the topic identified in their discipline and were in a position to write further materials in SLM format for distance learners.

At the end of the F2F Review Workshop II and online support in between Workshop I and II, each participant was able to edit and finalize the course units for CRC; develop related assignments and revise the evaluation strategy; and further strengthen the model of delivery support for one's own programme.

Approach

The approach for initiating the capacity building of participants was planned as:

- ❑ Development of Training page on WikiEducator with a template.
- ❑ Online interaction and induction of participants for one and half months including need assessment/analysis and sensitizing.
- ❑ Workshop I (for 5 days) initial lead presentations by two resource persons; followed by hands on activities to be undertaken in groups/individually; presentation by Groups/Individual (as the case may be) followed by discussion and interaction, brain-storming technique would also be used to throughout some important issues.
- ❑ Online follow-up support to participants for two and half months: course design, workload, content development and presentation, activities and other assessments through WikiEducator Platform.
- ❑ F2F Review Workshop II (for 5 days) : editing (content, format, language) of SLMs, assessment and evaluation, learning support system.
- ❑ Online follow-up support to participants for 2 months: to finalize the SLMs /Units for printing, designing assignment and other evaluation systems, strengthening learning support services.

Guidelines and Working Space

We provided step by step guidelines to prepare chapters/lessons/ units in self-learning format useful

for distance learners, including creation of User account on WikiEducator, editing skills (WikiSkills) through F2F Workshops, identification of content matters and conversion of materials as online materials. Capacities to collaborate and share the contents in its draft stage was also encouraged.

To expose to instructional design, an Open Education Resource (OER) book, "Write 2 Teach in 3 Days" was prepared and uploaded at https://wikieducator.org/Write_2_Teach_in_3_Days. The participants were suggested to go through the book while preparing for the workshops and development of their contents.

In order to help participants to quickly develop self-learning materials on the WikiEducator platform, some templates (<https://wikieducator.org/SLMtemplates1>) along with an automatic page creator (https://wikieducator.org/Project_Templates) were developed. Participants were only expected to have the typing skills on a computer and some basic word-processing skills. No programming or wiki knowledge were required.

Steps-by-Step guidelines

The participants were asked to follow following guidelines:

- ❑ Type your self-learning material chapter on a word processor.
- ❑ Log on to WikiEducator through the Main_Page.
- ❑ Browse the Learning Templates and Learning Activity Templates.
- ❑ Check the Sample Unit.
- ❑ Go to Creating Your Chapter, and type the Title of the Chapter in the box give there. Click the "Create Your Chapter Here" button.
- ❑ A new page will open with the title beginning "Editing ..." and having a box that has some instructions.
- ❑ Read these and follow the instructions there to "cut" and "paste" materials from the chapter created by you in a word processor.
- ❑ Only in the "Sections" and "Sub-sections", you need to use Learning Activity Templates. This

will be based on what are the different types of activities that you have included in your chapter.

- While using a Learning Activity Template, for example for SAQ, type `{{SLMsaq|SAQ=Type in your question here}}` .
- Similarly you can use other Learning Activity Template. For this you need to consult the appropriate Template as given in point 8 above.
- Once you have typed your materials on to this box, click the “Show preview” button. This will show you how your chapter will look like.
- After you are satisfied with the look and feel, click the “Save page” button.
- Your chapter is now created.

Feedback on Need Assessment

A need assessment form was developed and sent out to the participants. An analysis on the capabilities and skills available with the participants are analyzed. COL identified participants in consultation with Bangladesh Open University (Open School) and NGOs. The group comprise of 30 participants (63% from Open School and 37% from NGOs). All 30 participants identified on commencement of the project were contacted through email to check their online connectivity and their access to the email system. This was important as major component of the Project is covered through online support. Around 13% participants withdrew from the participation in the project and thus 4 new participants were identified and included in the project on later date. Those participants, who replied to the “Connect Mail”, were provided with a Need Assessment Form and around 18% responses were collected in person during the first workshop. A collective analysis of responses is as follows.

Observations and Analysis

Total responses received from the participants are 80% (24 responses). An analysis of these responses is as under keeping the sample size as 24 (100%).

- The analysis reveals that 16% participants are doctoral degree holders; 79% are postgraduate

degree holders and 5% are having bachelor’s degree.

- 29% of the participants are engaged in student support activities; 37.5% in ODL materials development; 12.5% in ODL Operations; 8.3% in AV materials development and 4.1% in research. Remaining 8.6% participants have not responded on this.
- 100% of participants expected to get capacities in the development of study materials. Though some of the participants emphasized more on F2F model of workshops, above 75% have had agreement for online support as well.
- 92% participants intended to develop of Self Instructional Materials (SIMs) for school education (42% for secondary level and 50% for Middle level) whereas 8% intend to develop SIMs for post-secondary level. The area of interest varied from participant to participant based on their own discipline (Example: Topic: Poultry with overview to identify the kind of poultry and its classification).
- Amongst the participants, 4% (1 in number) are not having access to computers, neither at workplace nor at home. One of the participants have not responded on the questions of his/her ICT capabilities. Thus, these two participants are not included in further observations of ICT capabilities.
- Almost all participants are working in Windows environment and have internet connectivity available to them. All participants have access to internet/email at office but only 12% participants have access to internet at home. The participants of Open School are connected to internet through LAN whereas participants from NGOs are using dial-up connections. All the participants are using Internet explorer to browse through net.
- Most of participants are using PCs mainly for word-processing, presentations and database management. 45% participants claim to have good word processing skills whereas similar percentage treats them having fair knowledge. 10% treat themselves as skilled as excellent in

word processing. The percentage of participants reduces as the applications on PC become more specific, the percentage of knowledge and skill reduces and participants have not responded to the skill ratings. The participants who had responded to the question rate the multimedia and HTML skills as poor.

The analysis is clearly revealing that the participants are knowledgeable about the Project and are keen to participate and work through. The self-rating of the available skills with them towards the laid objectives will certainly help them. On the other hand it was noticed that the keenness of participants towards multimedia and newer skills would help them in materials development.

Discussion

In close interaction with online and F2F coordinator and resource person, all the academic and logistic arrangements were carried out. These arrangements includes conduct of online motivation, exposure and skill training on WikiEducator, F2F Workshop I presentations by two resource persons; followed by hands on activities to be undertaken in groups/individually; presentation by Groups/Individual (as the case may be) followed by discussion and interaction and brain-storming technique.

The work completed in phased manner includes:

- Introduction to Wiki and Creation of WikiEducator account,
- Editing basics on Wiki,
- Text Formatting,
- New page and links creation,
- Images and media upload and its layout,
- Collaborative editing
- Communication and creation of lessons.

Discussion on Open Education Resource materials provided by COL for inclusion in the F2F workshops

was held among the Resource persons Group. Multiple copies of the draft of Chapter 6 “Open licenses” of Copyright for authors, educators and librarians’ written by Julien Hofman & Paul West (2007) would be made and distributed among the participants. A session on Open knowledge resources was held during the first workshop.

Outcomes

The tangible outcomes were visible during the project and during short term evaluation. Participants delivered what was demnded out of the training and some of the lessons in draft format are available at www.wikieducator.org/ Category: BOU_PROJECT. The lessons developed were clear indicators of long term project approach where resource persons and the participants are tied-up for a longer duration and interacted on micro level to achieve the objectives. The Bangladesh Open University’s SLMs have seen a major change in writing styles and knowledge dissemination and that is the success of the approach.

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