DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 265 638 EA 018 127

AUTHOR Knapper, Christopher; And Others
TITLE Instructional Development for Distance Education.
PUB DATE Aug 85
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the World Conference of the International Council for Distance Education (13th, Melbourne, Australia, August 1985).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Distance Education; Educational Quality; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Instructional Development; Nontraditional Education; Student College Relationship; Student Needs
IDENTIFIERS Canada; *University of Waterloo (Ontario)

ABSTRACT

Students taking university-level courses through distance education have special needs, primarily because of their isolation from immediate contacts with instructors and special facilities. Developing instructional methods to meet these needs is important if the quality of distance education is to be high. Schools established solely to provide distance education, such as Britain's Open University or Canada's Athabasca University, are committed to instructional development and the adequate training of instructors. But schools that provide a conventional, campus-based program and a distance program too often treat the distance program as merely an inferior version of the traditional program and give only token recognition to the special needs of the students. The University of Waterloo in Ontario offers distance education to 6,000 of its 25,000 students and has a small office of instructional development. This office has worked with other campus offices and departments on several projects, including conducting a major research study of program students, organizing workshops for both students and teachers, developing study skills materials for students, and consulting on preparation of an instrument for evaluating distance education. Still incomplete but in process is an effort to improve course design for distance education. (PGD)

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Christopher Knapper, Bruce Lumsden, John Stubbs
University of Waterloo, Canada

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Instructional Development, University Teaching, and the Quality of Distance Education

The profession of university teaching is quite unique in that most of its practicioners, while highly qualified within their disciplines, have generally had no formal training in methods of instruction -- an activity that is the basis of their day to day work. The past two decades have seen the growth of instructional (or staff) development centres in many university systems to provide advice and training for faculty on methods of teaching and learning and to give help with the improvement and evaluation of instructional activities.

In distance education instructional development has established a firm foothold in many special-purpose institutions, such as the British Open University. At the same time, in most dual-mode universities instructional development has been more piecemeal than systematic. As in much conventional university teaching, distance courses are often developed and delivered by an individual instructor, with little systematic course design, minimal effort at formative evaluation as the course is developed, and little attempt to assess the effectiveness of the course in relation to the learning needs of students. Perhaps even more important, in institutions that offer both on-campus and distance courses there is sometimes a tendency to overlook the special needs of distance learners -- for example requirements for frequent, full, and rapid feedback on the work they submit, some means of arranging interpersonal contact with the instructor and other students, and similar factors that derive from the physical and social isolation of the remote learner.

Meanwhile, at least in Canadian universities, there is increasing competition between institutions to attract new students for their distance programmes: in a time of scarce financial resources, distance courses can provide additional sources of revenue. This may be especially true in the arts and humanities areas, where enrollments have fallen off in recent years at the expense of the professional faculties. (At the University of Waterloo, for example, the Faculty of Arts has a very heavy involvement with the University's correspondence programme, and a significant proportion of its instruction is done in this mode by regular faculty as part of their normal teaching duties.) In such circumstances there is always a temptation to regard distance education as instruction "on the cheap". Since equivalent courses often already exist as part of the traditional on-campus curriculum, and since most of the necessary support systems are already in place, and in any case may be little used by distance learners, then (or so it is argued) correspondence courses are an attractive way of boosting enrollments with little need for additional resources.

*Paper presented at the 13th World Conference of the International Council for Distance Education, Melbourne, Australia, August 1985.

This viewpoint not only ignores the special needs of distance learners, referred to above, but also shows ignorance of the increasing sophistication of the clientele for distance education. For example, in many developed nations students have a wide -- and growing -- number of courses and institutions from which to choose. In Ontario alone, for example, more than half a dozen universities have distance education programmes and, if these do not meet students' needs, then they can turn to a large number of other institutions across the nation, including special-purpose distance universities such as Athabasca. Furthermore, there is evidence that distance learners are far from unsophisticated when it comes to making educational choices. A large-scale survey of those enrolled in the Waterloo correspondence programme showed that a majority had some university education prior to enrolling, and about a third had a university degree.

All these factors should suggest that greater attention will have to be paid to the quality of courses and the way in which they are developed, delivered, and evaluated. It seems reasonable that instructional developers could play an important role in this process, working in collaboration with distance learning professionals.

Instructional Development in the Waterloo Correspondence Program

The University of Waterloo is a large Canadian technologically-oriented university with an overall enrollment of some 25,000 students, of whom approximately 6,000 are taking correspondence courses. From modest beginnings in 1968, the correspondence programme now offers more than 300 courses a year, taught by audiocassette and accompanying course notes and textbooks. Courses are prepared and taught by regular faculty, and course offerings parallel those available in the on-campus programme -- in other words, there are no courses offered solely in distance mode. Academic responsibility for the programme rests with the faculties and departments, and indeed the Correspondence Office, which handles the overall supervision and administration of the programme, has no academic staff members, apart from the Director of Part-Time Studies and Continuing Education, a part-time position, who is responsible for setting overall policy for distance education. Hence introducing principles of instructional development, design, and evaluation is a difficult and somewhat sensitive matter. Nonetheless, some beginnings have been made.

In common with a number of Ontario universities Waterloo has a small office of instructional development. The Teaching Resource Office was established in 1976 to provide advice and consultation to the faculty on matters relating to teaching and learning. It has a full-time academic director and two additional part-time academic staff, and its activities include consultation to individuals and departments, maintenance of a computer database/library, organization of workshops, publications, a small grants programmes, a teaching award programme, and some modest research activity.

In the past few years there has been an active collaboration between the Teaching Resource Office and the Correspondence Program, encouraged by the programme's administrative staff, the Director of Part-Time Studies and several deans whose faculties are heavily involved in distance teaching and who are anxious to improve the quality of the course offerings. A number of different approaches to instructional development have been adopted. An early initiative was a major research study of students enrolled in the programme, to examine their demographic characteristics, motivations, attitudes, and study habits. This was followed by a smaller survey of students who made inquiries about the programme but did not in fact enroll, to determine the reasons for their decisions and to see how these related to the nature of the course offerings. The Teaching Resource Office has helped organized a number of workshops for correspondence students, faculty and marker/tutors. For example workshops on marking assignments and examinations (which is seen as a vitally important element of the programme) are organized each term for markers, and are well attended. Through its small grants programme, the TRO was instrumental in the preparation of a set of audiotapes on study skills, which correspondence students can loan or purchase. The tapes are not particularly geared to distance learners (apart from the medium itself), and a supplementary package that deals particularly with the problems of remote studying is in the preparation stage. Help was given with the design of an evaluation instrument, and consultation on evaluation of the quality of distance instruction is an on-going activity.

A major weakness of the Waterloo programme is the lack of any systematic course design, and in past year steps were taken to rectify this situation by bringing to Waterloo a consultant with considerable experience of course design in a number of Australian universities. Consultations were provided with individual correspondence instructors who were engaged in preparing new courses or revising old ones, a handbook for instructors was prepared that gives guidelines on writing a correspondence course, and the consultant also wrote a report on the whole distance education programme which should help to provide a useful direction for future instructional development work. In this connection a new appointment to the Teaching Resource Office has been made on the initiative of the Dean of Arts. This involves a faculty member who will devote a third of her time to instructional development specifically for correspondence instructors. The individual concerned, who has the title of Distance Education Advisor, is continuing the work of the outside consultant by offering advice to individual faculty members, and working on various types of printed resource material to help with the design and delivery of distance courses. She will also take responsibility for preparation of a regular newsletter focussing on correspondence teaching that will place major emphasis on instructional development. Given the size of the Waterloo correspondence programme this is a modest beginning, but it is hoped that by identifying course design and development as an important issue and appointing someone to take responsibility for this area, there will be increasing recognition of the specialised nature of distance teaching. In this way instructors should come to realise that preparation of

distance courses requires special skills that may not be the same as those involved in regular face-to-face teaching.

Some Benefits and Problems

As mentioned at the outset, the instructional development initiatives in distance education at most dual-mode institutions fall far short of what exists at special purpose universities where instructional design and evaluation has been built into the very structure of the programme, and is an inherent part of curriculum planning. Where the distance programme does not include instructional designers or developers on its own staff, then it is often possible to turn for help to the teaching advisory unit, assuming one exists on campus. This has been the approach taken at Waterloo, and has been at least partly successful in effecting change. It has also led to the appointment of an individual with special responsibility for the distance education programme who, in a sense, combines the best of three academic worlds: she is employed by the instructional development office, works through the distance education programme, and is herself a member of the academic staff who teaches both on-campus and distance courses.

It would be naive to think, however, that these fairly minor steps will transform the quality of distance education at Waterloo. Even supposing that the importance of instructional development was recognized by all those involved in preparing and delivering courses, there remains the problem of providing sufficient incentives to devote time to a process that might otherwise be done much more quickly -- if less effectively. Even more difficult is to provide incentives for change when this might involve challenges to long-held traditional assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning. On the other hand, any steps which result in a scrutiny of present practice are to be welcomed, and it can be hoped that even minor initiatives -- such as though described with respect to Waterloo -- can serve as the "thin end of the wedge" by establishing a small core of knowledgeable faculty whose influence on pedagogical matters will gradually extend beyond the scope of their own courses and help improve the quality of the entire programme.