
Distance teaching at the University of Guyana

For some three decades the Ministry of Education of Guyana conducted by radio a programme called Broadcast to Schools. It was aired daily for about one hour, and was focused at the primary school pupils level. It was voluntary for schools, and teachers who listened with their pupils were asked to complete an evaluation questionnaire on the programme.

More recently there was Spanish by Radio in the mid-80s which sought to improve teacher effectiveness in the teaching of Spanish. Each programme was in two parts. The first part focused on foreign language methods, and on feedback on students' performance at CXC. During the second part a beginners' Spanish course was taught, so that teachers could note how to apply certain teaching techniques, and also to teach those persons who were interested in learning Spanish. Homework was given and, at times, students who listened turned in their assignment through the mail. It was marked and returned by mail. Participation of students was totally voluntary.

Round about 1987, the Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (IACE) took the initiative to get into distance teaching. There were several radio programmes aired with a view to sensitising the general public about the nature and function of distance teaching, and the role it could play in improving the availability of education across the nation.

It was very appropriate for IACE to move in this direction since the institution already had centres in various parts of the country, where face-to-face teaching was generally done. Taking on board this new initiative was the natural thing to do. With significant assistance from the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and the British Council, in the form of teleconferencing equipment, books, manuals, computer diskettes, IACE was able to launch its first formal distance teaching course in December 1993 – the pre-university English course. A number of course writers were trained through a series of workshops, with resource persons drawn from external agencies, and from the University of Guyana itself. A resource person from the Educational TV Unit of the Ministry of Education, Trinidad and Tobago, conducted a workshop on scripting and producing materials for television and video.

The Distance Teaching Project at the University was also enhanced by the visit and subsequent report to the Commonwealth of Learning, of a consultant brought into Guyana to advise on distance teaching. In addition there was collaboration between IACE and UWIDITE and TEXTBOOKS FOR ALL project.

Such background information is important for understanding the role which IACE is competent to play in the development of distance teaching at the University of Guyana.

Recently, an ideal situation presented itself to the Faculty of Education, one

which would make the Faculty take a very firm decision to offer programmes by distance teaching. Some trained teachers from a remote region took the initiative to approach the Ministry of Education, asking for a distance teaching programme which would help them to obtain the Cert. Ed./B.Ed. degree from the University of Guyana. This was an important development since it was the target group that was taking the initiative, an important factor in a successful distance teaching project. This development added impetus to a decision the Faculty had made earlier to offer the Nursery and Primary Cert. Ed. programme by distance education to another group of teachers in another region. The University plans to begin with three core courses on issues in education, classroom testing and measurement, and English grammar, comprehension and composition skills. The model is to be a combination of distance teaching and face-to-face teaching.

The Faculty will be holding a series of workshops to increase the number of staff members who have skills in writing texts for teaching at a distance. The steps to be followed in the production of materials are those which have been used elsewhere:

- determine structure of course from existing curriculum
- identify objectives
- prepare course outline in units
- select media for unit
- decide on format
- make prototype
- test and revise as necessary
- reproduce material in bulk
- make use of materials (through students)
- evaluate and assess feedback
- use information from feedback to inform programme/course planning

The range of materials which are to be considered for inclusion in the 'packet' (and which are to be phased in if necessary) include: audio cassettes; instructional kits; radio programmes; self-instruction kits; study guides; and video tapes.

The delivery system is to be very closely examined. Decisions have to be taken whether to post, take, broadcast, telephone, use teleconferencing, or present material at study centres etc. These decisions influence not only the nature of the learning materials, but also the kinds of assignments and assessment procedures to be employed. In preparing its materials, the Faculty has to take into consideration what the research says about learner drop-out.

- Course factors – content not being what was expected, or overloaded with too much material to be covered in too little time by what is mainly self-directed learning
- Institutional factors – not enough tuition/counselling available, inadequate facilities, disorganised schedules
- Learning environment – illness, accident, job change, unemployment, different responsibilities
- Learner's approach to learning – learner perceives self as not clever enough, or being too old to learn; he/she may have difficulty using tests, writing assignments; there may be lack of confidence in ability to pass examinations
- Motivational factors – coursework is associated with a goal which is no longer desirable or necessary, or which has been achieved in a

different way; another goal may have taken priority, or better opportunities to fulfil the need may have been provided or offered elsewhere.

With all the foregoing considerations in mind, there is need for formative evaluation at every stage in the production of materials – planning, development, dissemination and implementation, and summative evaluation. The University is working towards launching the programme by the academic year 1995. Although some funding is available through the Faculty's own budget, there is definitely a need for much additional funding.

Areas for close attention as the University implements the programme include:

- the kinds of 'entry requirements' which will be advocated. Will these be only or purely academic, or will factors pertaining to maturity and self discipline be included?
- the possible effects of the distance teaching route for obtaining the Cert.Ed. or B.Ed.
- movement of materials, and communication systems
- competing courses offered by other institutions in Guyana
- designing appropriate 'global' evaluation procedures
- organisation of the practicum – school-based/institution-based combination.