The role of ODL in curriculum development

Helen Lentell

Open and distance learning (ODL) has the potential to play a major role in curriculum development, particularly in developing countries. But to achieve this potential, it is essential that educators and administrators address underpinning systems that ensure successful implementation – in particular those of administration and learner support.

ODL has the capacity to transform both what counts as learning and our relationship to the processes of learning. To study this, we need to take a definition of curriculum that not only covers the content of what is taught but also embraces teaching, learning and assessment.

What's so special about ODL?

ODL has a number of defining features, including the separation in time and space of teacher and learners; industrialised processes; scalability and cost efficiency; and the use of technology for learning, flexibility and reach. We take much of this for granted. Indeed, ODL methodologies have in many ways become so much a part of the educational scene that we are in danger of forgetting some of the revolutionary contributions it makes and, indeed, its relevance to the transformation of the curriculum.

Of all the key characteristics of ODL, there are three that are not usually highlighted – those of openness; instructional design; and learner centeredness and support. These are the three that have profoundly influenced curriculum development.

Openness

The underpinning philosophy of ODL is that education is a human right. Education is empowerment. Education is both about individual development and about societal development – it is about knowledge, skills acquisition, citizenship and social justice. And it is a key feature of ODL that barriers to accessing education are removed.

'Openness' is a defining idea of the Open University (OU) in the UK. Its inspiring mission is to be:

- open as to people
- open as to places
- open as to methods
- open as to ideas.

Clearly openness as a philosophy has profound implications for educational practice. One characteristic of this is that teaching is no longer the private concern of the teacher in the enclosed world of their classroom. The curriculum and the production of the curriculum are very much in the public domain. Courses are produced in most ODL higher education environments by the college as a whole. So ODL team methods, such as those used in the OU, prove to be a hard discipline in openness. Each member brings drafts to the team, time and time again, and has to hear and absorb criticism of their style, content and approach. Few teachers in conventional face-to-face teaching have to endure this in their lifetimes. This degree of collaboration and examination by colleagues is rare and results in quality materials; as in almost all cases it draws better work from each team member than could have been accomplished by them on their own. These courses are then put out into the public domain for all to judge. This openness has had a profound effect on the quality of higher education in the UK; it has set the standard.

Instructional design

In ODL, the learning materials take the place of the teacher. This means that the materials have to be carefully designed. *Instructional design* has been defined as:

> the systematic development of instructional specifications using learning and instructional theory to ensure the quality of instruction. It is the entire process of analysis of learning needs and goals and the development of a delivery system to meet those needs. It includes development of instructional materials and activities; and tryout and evaluation of all instruction and learner activities.[1]

This definition can usefully be supported by Romiszowksi's definition of the word *instruction* as 'a goal-directed teaching process which is more or less pre-planned'.[2]

Instructional design is therefore a process that works in a systematic way to translate learners' needs and goals into successful learning (see Figure 1).

Of course instructional design is not a simple mechanistic process, as perhaps might be suggested by Figure 1. It is informed by learning theory. But ODL has made this discipline uniquely its own. Materials are consistently and carefully planned, tested and revised. And unlike textbooks, ODL materials use embedded learning devices and design to encourage and support self-study.

And unlike much classroom teaching, they are created around learning outcomes – 'What does a student need to know?' – rather than an unfolding story getting to some kind of a conclusion. Assessment schemes are published; assignments specify carefully what is wanted and are not some version of 'guess what I am thinking'; and assessment follows defined criteria. No doubt there is some classroom teaching that is like this. But the enduring legacy of ODL is that it sees the need to consciously demand a clear curriculum framework and clear criteria for developing and delivering the curriculum, and in so doing influences other provision too.

Learner centeredness and learner support

The development of study materials and the delivery of courses in ODL have always been informed by the needs of learners. Some find this an oxymoron. How is it possible that a mass system – geared to increasing access and to doing this cost effectively – could possibly be learner centred? In planning ODL courses the starting point should always be the learners. Planners should ask: Who will the learners be? How old will they be? What prior knowledge do they have? Why do they want to study?

Questions such as these enable the picture of the typical learner to be drawn or the learner profile built. These profiles are important because they provide the author with data that will enable them to make informed judgements about the key aspects of the development of the learning materials – such as literacy levels, communication technology skills, and prior knowledge.

But of course it is the learner support that individualises ODL and recognises the particular needs of learners as individuals. And it is the responsibility of the tutor in ODL to facilitate the learning of each of their students.

Teaching in ODL is therefore delivered by the study materials and by the tutor. And since the materials deliver 'the content', it is the role of the tutor to consciously set about helping their students to learn. This, therefore, is another major contribution of ODL. That is, to shift 'teaching' from the performance of the lecturer – polished, well-prepared, beautifully presented lectures; to what may appear less impressive – the act of careful, attentive, responsive questioning of, and listening to, learners.

These three areas are key features of ODL and have provided an enduring legacy to curriculum development and delivery in all modalities. But ODL provision has not always lived up to these standards. There has been a lot of bad practice in the field, exploiting the huge demand for education and lifelong learning across the world. As education becomes a globally traded commodity, it is increasingly necessary to develop quality guidelines and criteria in this market to protect citizens from bad practice.

With this knowledge of the history of ODL, we can move forward to look at its future. And to ask: Will there be a distinctive role for ODL in curriculum development?

The role of ODL in developing the curriculum now

The information given on ODL so far, broadly covers the two periods of ODL history that Taylor (2001)[3] has termed second and third generation. The second generation is the multimedia model, and the third generation is the tele-learning model. The fourth generation, our present era, is the flexible learning model – characterised by online and web-based technologies. Many institutions use hybrid combinations of delivery modes in distance education programmes, including elements of face-to-face instruction. These new technologies are providing completely new ways of thinking about the delivery of the curriculum.

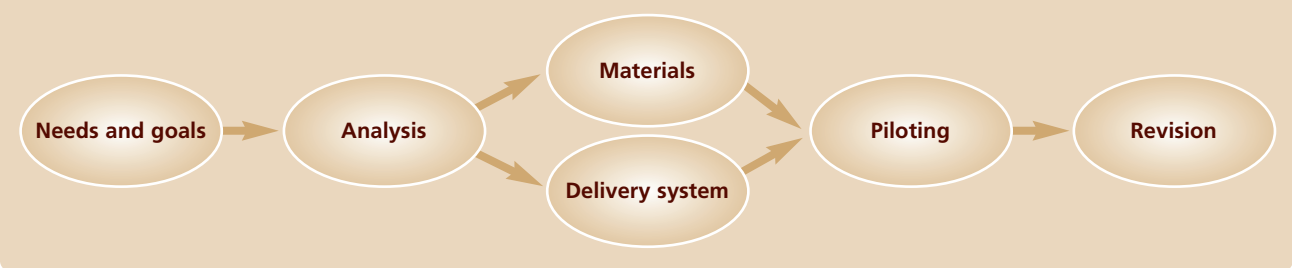
Interesting though these developments are, there are more practical concerns. These are currently being tackled by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), whose mission is focused on how open and distance and technology-enhanced learning can be harnessed in the service of development. Development, however we define it, is largely a challenge of learning – both formal and informal. No matter which aspect of development – be it governance, health care, disease prevention, management, food security, teaching, business or livelihoods – any expansion or improvement of provision necessitates the input of education and training.

While much has been claimed about the way in which ODL can take learning to scale and how new technologies can increase provision of education and training in the developing world, we are challenged in our work by some basic absences – reliable power sources; infrastructure; underpinning management, technician and supervisory skills; and keyboard skills, to name but a few. In the light of these absences, what is it that ODL can realistically offer to curriculum development in the developing world?

Course development

The immediate promise, to ODL, of the new technologies is the ability to increase and deepen the team-authoring and sharing of educational resources – a key aspect of curriculum development

Figure 1 The process of instructional design



in ODL. The Internet is a wonderful resource, and web-based resources are getting better and better. Wikipedia, the collaboratively written encyclopedia, is a wonderful tribute to the collective intellectual endeavor of humankind. Its special web site, a 'wiki', makes collaboration much easier. There are increasing numbers of collaboratively authored electronically downloadable course materials – open educational resources (OERs) – that can then be used in a paper format with learners who do not have the kind of access to the Internet that their educators and trainers have.

The potential of OERs is to make available, to the ODL community of educators and trainers, knowledge and learning resources that had previously been inaccessible to them. The use of these resources increases access to knowledge and learning for their students. But this does not have to be a one-way traffic because the technology allows users in developing countries to take these materials and adapt them, to make them more contextually relevant and appropriate and, indeed, to initiate content development themselves. Thus the OER movement enables educators and trainers in developing countries to contribute to the global knowledge community as active participants rather than passive consumers of others' 'knowledge'. In other words, this development has the potential to democratise knowledge creation itself and to do so in a collaborative and collegial environment.

It is also true that the sharing of OERs requires rigour and skill in instructional design, and an understanding of the wider educational frameworks within which they might be used. Merely producing 'nice' resources is of little sustainable value. For example, COL's PREST materials (Practitioner Research and Evaluation Skills Training in Open and Distance Learning) were carefully designed to fit into international qualification standards to make it much easier to adapt and localise them. Teachers who access resources from the web for regular classroom use report that those that refer to the level of study are most useful.

Professional development for ODL practitioners

The new technologies provide the means for improving and supporting professional practice by building communities of practice. Online communities – forums where teachers share experiences and ideas – can be a major response to the massive need for training and re-training of educators. This is especially so when they are supported by active professional associations, such as EDEN (The European Distance Education Network) or DEASA (Distance Education Association of Southern Africa). COL takes an active role in building and supporting ODL professional communities across the Commonwealth.

It is in the area of resources and professional development that ODL of the fourth generation is making a significant contribution to curriculum development for the developing world. But some big issues remain for ODL to tackle in order to make a successful and sustained contribution to transitioning societies.

Capacity building

There has to be greater attention paid to capacity building – both human and institutional. There is a great need for work-based training for ODL. For instance, COL has developed a template to

facilitate easier access to instructional design skills. Authors can drop their text into the pre-formatted design sheets. It takes a long time to train an instructional designer so this should prove to be of great assistance in getting people on board faster. But it is not of much use if the users don't understand some of the underpinning principles of course development in ODL, such as outcomes-based learning. Nor will it help if users don't have the keyboard or computing skills to use the template. Moreover, one-off training that is disassociated from its implementation will never work. All training in this applied area has to be work-based and supported by the senior management. If not, it will not be sustainable.

Sustainable systems

ODL needs functioning and integrated institutional systems to ensure its success. Essentially ODL is a division of labour of all the component parts of teaching – for example, student recruitment and enrolment, record keeping, course development, delivery, and assessment. These systems seldom come about or run on their own. In order for the potential of economies of scale (which is the promise of ODL) to be realised, institutional management has to be trained and supported in skills related to policy, planning and project management.

Learner support

Without learner support, ODL would fail the vast majority of learners. One of the challenges in developing countries is the lack of trained and qualified people to be tutors. Tutors must have considerable expertise in their subject or discipline; and the ability to offer support in that subject or discipline to learners. But how realistic is this in the context of a developing world where the very reason for adopting ODL methodology is to overcome a gross shortage of human resources? Where would these tutors come from? It is perhaps our failure to find a convincing solution to this dilemma that has impeded the successful implementation of ODL methodology in many developing countries.

We need to develop new and different models that are more appropriate to the context of developing societies. The criteria by which we will judge these models will be based on whether or not they help to bring about the educational and training goals that have been set. Until we do this, ODL will not fulfil its potential.

While ODL has made a groundbreaking contribution to curriculum development and learning, and ODL's methods and tools continue to be critical in democratising learning, ODL will not fulfil its promise to transitioning societies if the underpinning foundations – administrative and operational systems, capacity building, and learner support – are ignored.

Excerpted from a speech to the African Conference on Curriculum Development: Contesting spaces – the curriculum in transition, UNISA, South Africa, 19–21 September 2006.

Endnotes

1 Pennsylvania State University Definitions of Instructional Design. http://www.umich.edu/~ed626/define.html Accessed 25th August 2006.
2 Romiszowksi, AJ (1981) quoted in Freeman, R (2005) *Creating Learning Materials for Open and Distance Learning: A handbook for Authors and Instructional Designers*. The Commonwealth of Learning.
3 Taylor, JC (2001) '5th Generation Distance Education'. DETYA's Higher Education Series. Quoted from http://pages.britishlibrary.net/blwww3/education/online.htm. Accessed 27th April 2006.

Biographical notes

Helen Lentell joined the Commonwealth of Learning in 2001 as Education Specialist, Training and Materials Development. Her role is to work with Commonwealth Governments, organisations and institutions to support them in building sustainable systems in open and distance learning. This covers the organisational development for the delivery of Open and Distance Learning. Her responsibilities include planning, implementing and managing sustainable systems for Open and Distance Learning.

Previously, she was with the UK National Extension College as Head of Higher Education and Professional Studies. There she developed a number of innovative work-based distance education learning programmes for enterprises of all sizes, with a particular focus on micro businesses. These initiatives were all partnership programmes, with the National Extension College designing and developing both the study materials and the delivery systems. Prior to this, she worked at the UK Open University in a number of roles, and has also been a visiting scholar at Deakin University (Australia).