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OSI Network Library Program

A Distance Learning Initiative
for Professional Development

lyn robinson
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Overview

- In this session, we will look at the concept of distance learning, particularly in the context of professional development
- We will look at the theoretical bases of the topic, and try to elucidate some practical consequences

What is distance learning?

- learning (mostly) at a distance from the teacher
- learning (mostly) at a distance from other students
- study is guided, in contrast to self-learning

- it is not a new concept
- it is topical today in association with concepts such as:
 - open learning
 - life-long learning
 - continuous professional development

How is distance learning different from traditional learning?

- limited support of study group
- limited "face to face" interaction with the teacher
- need to set own goals and take responsibility for learning
- (Moore 1980)
 - learning is self-directed, independent and autonomous

Why is distance learning so relevant today?

- technological advances?
- changes in society?
- changes in the place of learning within society
 - emphasis on continuous and/or professional learning
 - convenience of distance learning

Jarvis, Holford and Griffin (1998)

- list some recent changes in our approaches to learning:
 - from childhood to adult learning
 - from the few to the many
 - from liberal to vocational learning
 - from theoretical to practical
 - from welfare provision to market demand

- they also observe changes in the way learning occurs
 - from education to learning
 - from teacher-centered to student-centered learning
 - from rote learning to reflective learning
 - from learning as a process to learning as content

- and finally changes in the content of what is learnt
 - from single-discipline knowledge to multi-discipline knowledge to integrated knowledge
 - from knowledge as truth to knowledge as relative
 - from a classical curriculum to a romantic curriculum to programme

The rationale.....

- Knowles (1975)
 - “rapid change will be the only stable characteristic...”
 - the ability to learn on one’s own (to think critically) has suddenly become a prerequisite for living in our world today

Critical thinking

- Brookfield (1987)
 - recognising and challenging assumptions
 - recognising the importance of the context
 - being willing to explore alternatives
 - becoming relatively sceptical

So.....

- self-directed learning is more than just choosing which resources to use and what to study - it should be a process of reflection on the nature of society and the individual’s place in it, leading to personal growth

What does this mean for distance learning?

- the education process should make it possible for learners to reflect on the material they are studying, and to relate it to their own situation and experience

Adult learners

- rich in experience, with attitudes relevant to the subject
- goal-orientated
- self-aware
- 'haunted' by memories of school
- diverse in beliefs about learning
- concerned about money, family, work
- expect value for input of time and money

Consequences.....

- asking adults to follow unchanged college courses is rarely effective -

Competencies

- (Knowles 1980)
 - learners can specify what new things they will understand, or be able to do, after the learning
- this popular approach forms the basis of most vocational training, which offers a promise of 'learning outcomes'
- this approach, although valuable, has its limitations

Expectations of learners

- Rowntree (1988)
 - learning as memorising
 - learning as understanding
 - learning as application
 - learning for personal development

Distance learning courses should facilitate:

- some memorising
- understanding and application
 - (knowledge and skills)
- critical reflection

- content should be set within a framework of communication and interactions
- to some extent, this will depend on the technology available
 - email
 - web pages
 - video

- Moore (1993)
 - learner-content interaction
 - learner-instructor interaction
 - learner-learner interaction

Design of materials

- (Holmberg 1995)
 - presentation should be easily accessible
 - colloquial language
 - personal style of writing
 - explicit advice
 - encouragement for critical thinking
 - free exchange of viewpoints
 - careful structuring of material
 - relevant to learners situation

- different styles of learning suit different people

Role of the teacher?

- learning is self-directed, not dictated by any one individual
- teachers should be facilitators and enablers of learning (Jarvis, Holford and Griffin 1998)
- teachers should themselves engage in critical reflection on their activities

A strategy for distance learning course design

- Colour code activities:
 - Blue
 - Pink
 - Green

Blue

- focus on:
 - competencies of understanding
- enables students to:
 - read and discuss relevant material with understanding
- taught by:
 - lectures, seminars/tutorials, course notes, reading lists, non-interactive online tutorials
- assessed by:
 - multiple choice questions, essay assignments, presentations

Pink

- focus on:
 - competencies of practice or skills
- enables students to:
 - carry out professionally relevant tasks, for example, internet searching, evaluation of resources
- taught by:
 - demonstrations, practical exercises, interactive online tutorials
- assessed by:
 - practical skills

Green

- focus on:
 - critical reflection
- enables students to:
 - integrate a variety of skills and knowledge, and apply it to their professional situation, for example, the design of a training course, preparation of a requirements document for a library management system
- taught by:
 - individual work, seminars

- assessed by:
 - written and/or oral presentation of student work

- in theory blue activities will precede pink, and pink will precede green
- in practice the learning process will probably be cyclical
- we shall see.....

www.osi.hu/nlp

lynrobinson@cs.com