

Chapter 11

Launching and sustaining a DL programme with NICTs

Speed, risks, and opportunities

The initial decision of starting a DL programme with NICTs depends on the issues mentioned in Chapter 2. Just as a quick reminder:

In the first place:

- The distance that separates the students and the educational institution and their geographical scattering.
- The time available by the students. Or their resistance to attend an educational institution.
- The need or interest in broadening the scope of the institution, caring for (or caring for in a better way) those students from far away areas, geographically scattered, with little time available, or limited possibilities of attending an educational institution.

Other possible benefits may be:

- The opportunity a programme with these characteristics offers regarding a pedagogical (as well as technological) update.
- The interest in bridging the “digital gap”.

All those may be good reasons but must be carefully assessed. DL with NICTs is not always suitable and it can even produce contrary effects as I mentioned in Chapter 2.

There can also arise:

- The need and interest of cost saving.

This is generally false, as I have already said. However, in some cases the savings are important when distances and scattering are significant. Some savings may be the result of transferring some costs to the students or to other institutions, as I mentioned in the previous chapter.

There can also be:

- “Market” requirements and opportunities: an increasing demand of new educational delivery methods.
- Institutional requirements and opportunities to start this kind of programmes “in order to be up to date”, “to modernise”, etc. A clear example of this is when there are funds available for these programmes (from the institution, its financing institutions, the government, international organizations) but not for other things.

When these factors are present, it is crucial to study how to benefit the most from opportunities and avoid the risks they might imply. For instance, opportunities regarding pedagogical updates, reaching new sectors, increasing income due to corporate education and due to postgraduate courses. And risks such as confusing technological with pedagogical updates or not considering the most disfavoured social sectors.

***In case there is a programme in your institution, what reasons led to its start?
In case there is not, why are you thinking of starting it?***

Where do we start?

A DL programme with NICTs is not easy to prepare for the inexperienced ones.

That is why as a starting point, it would be convenient to prioritise some courses, topics or areas and some type of learners. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, within vocational training there usually appear:

- *Complementary* training in subjects and *mainstream* competencies.
- *Levelling* basic training.
- *Updates* for people who already have an important prior training.
- *Postgraduate courses* for working students.
- *Internal training*, particularly for teachers.
- “*Corporate*”, “tailor-made” courses for enterprises.

Working in all or just some of these areas will depend on the strategic decisions of the institution. Probably the social and political priorities of the institution will be important: the people who will benefit from them, the impact on their job opportunities, etc.

The previous experience and the existing abilities may also be significant. For instance, it may be convenient to start with courses with which the institution has had previous classroom-based teaching experiences. Another possibility would be to start with courses with which the institution has had previous experiences working at a distance but with “older” technologies.

What is old and what is new?

What may be better for launching a DL programme with NICTs? Young people or experienced people?

This kind of programme is a good chance for pedagogical and methodological updating. It forces training and research as well as experimenting and assessing. It demands making educational processes explicit, which may be useful afterwards in other areas of the institution. It gives good reasons to incorporate new people to it...or experienced people... Or, to combine experiences and share knowledge.

Many vocational training institutions have experience in DL. However, they do not always take that into account when engaging in e-learning. And that is a shame; in fact many of the problems they will encounter are those that DL programmes have already found. Much of the knowledge gained from those DL programmes will have to be rebuilt at higher costs, if that experience is disregarded. The so called e-learning *is* basically DL that uses NICTs.

What I mean is, for example, problems and knowledge regarding issues such as:

- Cases in which DL is adequate and cases in which it is not.
- The building of multi or interdisciplinary teams.
- The pedagogical design of the courses.
- The production of materials.
- The work of tutors; selecting and training them.
- Assessment of technologies.
- Financing courses and programmes.
- Management of distance or blended learning programmes.

For example high dropout levels have always been a problem and concern of DL that reappears or simply continues. Alarming dropout levels of up to 80%

have existed and continue to exist. In view of that, things which took time to be learnt, such as the importance of tutorials and motivation, the reestablishment of the face-to-face meetings and the groups, must be appreciated.

Regarding all these issues, those who have worked in DL have an invaluable experience. If that experience has been systematised and assessed,¹ the whole team should know about it. In case it has not, ways of sharing must be found. Integrating people who have participated is crucial.

As I think it has been made clear throughout this book, that experience will not be just a past experience to bear in mind but something to be directly incorporated in many cases. Many combined delivery methods (“blended”, “no distance”, etc.) include things from the “old” DL that, in many cases, are still very useful. Printed material, audio recordings, videos or face-to-face activities will be part of many good “new” programmes. It would be a pity to think that as “now everything is done through the Internet” we spent months or years before learning it.

In some institutions NICTs are simply another aspect that has been included in the departments, area or programmes of DL.² This appears to be a good option when those departments are strong. However, it is also true that some distance programmes may have weakened and they may no longer be adapted to re-launch DL.³ They may have even become stagnant in pedagogical or managerial issues or may have failed in issues that internally invalidate them. But it is even possible to learn from the failures (and particularly from them)...

Speed of implementation

If a DL programme has been working for some time, making it grow or changing its technological aspects may not be so difficult. But if there is not such a programme or if it is very weak, how fast will it be convenient to move forwards?

***Will it be better to start with a small team and pilot experiences?
Or set up a big team from the beginning and plan having thousands of students in the first year?***

1 See for example Restrepo, 2002.

2 Such is the case of SENAC in Brazil.

3 Apparently this was the case of SENA in Colombia.

It may seem obvious that the first option is the best. And that is what some institutions have done.⁴ It may be too risky to fully engage into a great investment and face problems with little experience and without pilot tests to improve the course of action.

Pedagogical failures (high dropout levels, bad educational results), social failures (the expected learners do not take the course), economic failures (wrongly evaluated costs), or technological failures (“broken down” courses, impossibility to access) can have significant political consequences including closing down a programme or losing prestige.

Nevertheless, it is also true that without a strong and decisive move, it may happen that not much progress is ever done. As little is invested on it, not very encouraging results are obtained. And therefore there is no point in investing more, it is a kind of vicious circle or self performed prophesy: “I said this would not work...”

It is neither positive to spend years accumulating good “experiences” that will be seen as little valuable adventures with an enormous effort put on them that cannot multiply themselves nor become systematic working methods. One has to start again, learn how to design courses and materials, learn about tutorials and management and about technologies and costs. One must choose a LMS or try building it, make its Web site and Intranet, etc. In the long run this is very discouraging for everyone.

An alternative to these two trends, avoiding careless rush or fearful slowness, may be to engage into a strong move but in stages. To anticipate the resources to carry out an in-depth work in a big scale; to start a test programme, assess it and correct mistakes and, except for problems that are impossible to solve, progress towards an expansion as a whole, possibly in annual steps.

Three or four years for a programme of this kind to develop is a reasonable time. Ten years is not.

Or is it?

4 Such as INA in Costa Rica.

Location in the institution

Which is the best place to locate a programme of this kind?

After all, does there have to be one programme or will it be better to have a set of articulated programmes?

There are several possible locations for the activities of DL with NICTs in vocational training institutions. The most adequate one will probably depend on the history, features, possibilities and strategies of each institution. To help you imagine possibilities, here we will review some of the problems implied in that decision.

DL, NICTs or what?

As I have already said, when there is a department or area of DL, the most logical thing to happen is that DL with NICTs should be addressed from there. Creating a new one for e-learning is wasting the experience in DL and, perhaps, favouring an assumption that considers the new area to be mainly technological and not pedagogical.

But it may happen that this new programme is created much more linked to the use of NICTs as support for educational activities in general. IT departments sometimes expand towards that direction as part of their own initiative or due to requests performed by other areas of the institution. Their activities are, therefore, not only on DL but on several means for all educational methods including face-to-face learning. If apart from that, there was not an area for DL or it was weak, it may be desirable to keep the same location. Then, what seems necessary is to strengthen it with other specialists in education, communication and DL. The technological specialists cannot direct this area on their own.

Another alternative is that this area is developed in a department for the production of materials and educational means that has worked mainly with “old” ICTs. In such a case, the reinforcement will have to be done by introducing specialists on NICTs and DL. The same applies for the cases when they are born in pedagogical support departments, in which case it may also be necessary to incorporate communicators.

In fact, what I am trying to make you remember is that this is an area where several disciplines converge (see Chapter 1).

Specific team vs. a method incorporated to all areas

A team who is in charge of running the distance learning courses with NICTs can be a good option, particularly at the beginning, in order to give soundness to the experience. There is a risk that these activities are regarded as a separate thing by the institution and remain isolated from the rest. They could even be seen with distrust or as if they belonged to another institution, losing the possibilities of mutual learning.

Another possibility is that multiple experiences may have been arising in each department or thematic area. Then there will be DL activities with higher or lower use of NICTs in basic or higher training, industrial training, service learning, etc. leading to a natural insertion into each area which is adapted to the specific educational needs. Besides, if some kind of articulation is implemented among them, it may also allow to compare different types of teaching actions and experiences and to benefit from the best features of each of them. This articulation will be necessary so that no learning efforts are repeated and in order to avoid multiple technological purchases which would turn out so varied in shape and format that would make working together impossible.

The ideal thing may be combining both methods profiting from the advantages and reducing the disadvantages of both. An example may be a central unit closely related to the different areas that provides services to all of them and works in joint teams for each course.⁵

Geographical centralisation-decentralisation

This issue is of major importance in institutions with broad geographical scope. Courses prepared in the headquarters may not work properly in every region or town, or may need too important local adaptation efforts. Even when it is intended to make a centralised production, it may be useful to leave “holes” to be filled by the regional or local centres. The duties corresponding to each centre during the development of the courses must be clearly stated.⁶

Strongly autonomous decentralised programmes are capable of guaranteeing more contextualized work, encourage experimenting and creativity, and en-

5 It is also the case of INA in Costa Rica as per what was discussed with the people in charge of it.

6 SENAC in Brazil does it this way (SENAC, 2004b).

sure greater commitment with the task. Then, they will not be perceived as “the courses that come from the top”. If they are not articulated in some way, efforts may be doubled and knowledge wasted.

The ideal thing may be working out methods that combine both aspects. An interesting solution is making regional centres work specifically in those areas and courses for which they are better qualified and share their production with the rest of the centres. It is produced in a decentralised way but it is used in all centres.⁷

It is important to remember that close tutorials with possible face-to-face consultations, meetings and workshops may be important and useful tools in the programmes. That is why having a big “permeable” net throughout the territory is very advantageous.⁸ DL programmes are, themselves, a type of educational decentralisation, but the previous physical decentralisation promotes its development.

NICTs provide decentralised but articulated working strategies. Advertisers who work alone can work together with the big teams and projects (Bates, 2001), and the local initiatives with the central ones.

Own or outsourced production

Some vocational training institutions have outsourced almost all their educational activities.⁹ They only establish general policies, manage founding and control the quality of the services. For those institutions this new area will also be outsourced.

Others, however, directly perform teaching but may prefer starting the activities in this area in a totally or partially outsourced way¹⁰ only while they learn how to do it or at a long term basis. From my point of view, total and long term outsourcing of only this area may turn it into an isolated island. Perhaps it does not have the flaws of the institution but it will neither benefit from mutual learning.

When outsourcing is partial it is important to think which aspects shall be handled by others and for how long. The contracting conditions and the agree-

7 According to its staff, SENA in Colombia works in this way.

8 As the people in charge of SENAI in Santa Catarina (Brazil) stated.

9 For example SENCE in Chile.

10 As INA in Costa Rica did.

ments to be made are also important in order to ensure the later retrieval avoiding depending on the supplier, as we mentioned in previous chapters. If the area is important for the institution, my view is that at least the pedagogical management of the courses and programmes should never be lost. It is barely easier to outsource or contract services on other aspects (production of materials, technological support).

In sum, it can be originated at the departments or units of DL, NICTs, means and educational materials, or pedagogical support. The options are a specific team or a team incorporated to the different working areas, and a centralised or decentralised production strategy with own or outsourced production. There can also be several combinations of these alternatives.

Which alternative did your institution choose and why?

or

Which one do you think is more appropriate for your institution in case it will be starting a programme?

And reintroducing the previous items,

Where did you start? How fast did your institution start?

or

What would be the convenient starting point and the adequate pace?
