CONTINUING EDUCATION AND DISTANCE MONITORING: AN ALTERNATIVE DELIVERY SYSTEM FOR TET AT AIT-CEC

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Introduction

The Asia-Pacific region, similar to the rest of the developed countries in the world, has widely recognized human resources development as one of the most important components of institution building and organizational reforms. The region has given high priority to staff development and trainers training activities, especially among institutions involved in social and economic development programs. The fast developments and changes in the global economy and the shift to new social and economic development paradigms and strategies have altered the nature and work programs of many institutions. In effect, this situation has underscored the need for more trained manpower who have mastered new knowledge and skills as well as developed work attitudes suitable for a dynamic and changing workplace.
Although many institutions in the region have increased their budget and intensified their staff development programs, the efforts have mainly focused on increasing the number of trained staff. Improving training quality has been limited to merely improving subject-matter contents. On the whole, very little attention has been given to improving the trainers' mastery of innovative and to more cost-effective learning processes and methods. Highly successful training programs require, not only mastery of subject matter, but also the development of a well-planned training strategy and curriculum, the implementation of a systematic learning process that is needs-based and learner-centered, and the application of appropriate educational technologies and methods.

Recent research findings on individual and group learning behaviors and processes, especially among adults enrolled in continuing education programs, have resulted in the development of alternative delivery techniques and methods that are combined with the wide availability and use of computers and new communication technologies. Thus, the Continuing Education Center (CEC) of the Asian Institute of Technology, in its effort to continuously search for new and innovative methods to improve training quality, has recently embarked on a new training program in partnership with the Economic Development Institute/The World Bank and the University of Illinois. The program aims to improve training quality through a one-year trainers' workshop. The trainers' workshop adopts an alternative delivery system that combines both peer learning and distance mentoring methodologies. In addition, this workshop incorporates internet/web-based distance education, collaborative learning, case teaching, on-line tutoring/coaching, virtual information networking, etc. The goal of the workshop is to help build or increase the capability of institutions and trainers in the critical areas of market demand and training needs assessment, curriculum development, instructional design, computer-assisted instruction, multi-media materials development, learning methods application and training evaluation.

**Trainers' Workshop on Improving Training Quality through Peer Learning and Distance Mentoring**

The workshop, as a training program, offers a collaborative opportunity for senior trainers to study and work together, through real and virtual group interaction, to improve their mastery of:

- innovative training designs
- learner-centered curriculum development
- participatory learning method applications
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- peer learning and distance mentoring techniques
- use of computers/internet-based training resources

Objectives

Specifically, the objectives of the workshop are as follows:

- Facilitate knowledge sharing and peer learning among senior trainers from national or regional training institutions on innovative and more cost-effective training design, curriculum development and interactive learning methods

- Review the state-of-the-art in adult learning methods and, through guided and structured learning activities, provide participants with practical know-how and skills for developing training plans, curricula/modules and/or methods for use in their actual training activities.

- Provide distance mentoring/on-line coaching assistance to participants through an internet/web-based distance learning method, to help facilitate virtual discussions and collaboration among participants in applying or practicing appropriate pedagogical concepts and skills to improve their training skills.

Expected Learning Outcomes

After completing the workshop, participants are expected to perform the following:

- identify the critical steps and principles of a training curriculum planning and development process, including guidelines and considerations for instructional design, interactive learning methods selection, etc.

- through peer learning and distance mentoring/on-line coaching, demonstrate a mastery of appropriate teaching and learning skills, including the completion of a well-designed curriculum plan, with training modules for at least eighteen learning hours, which will incorporate appropriate learning methods and materials, on a given topic

- demonstrate the ability to apply innovative instructional methods (peer learning, active/participatory learning, case study, etc.) as well as computer-assisted technologies (i.e., use of Internet/WWW for material searches, Power-Point presentations, simulations, etc.) in their training plans and programs
• through just-in-time and hands-on training, master the procedures and techniques for internet/web-based virtual information networking and distance mentoring for on-line coaching.

**Intended Beneficiaries**

This problem-solving and output oriented training program is intended for senior or master trainers from national or regional institutions with some experience in curriculum design, training module development and/or learning materials preparation. One of the outputs from the participants is a training curriculum with accompanying instructional module/materials for at least eighteen learning hours. Participants are also expected to train other trainers in his/her own institution and/or other institutions in the country or elsewhere.

**Pre-requisites**

Prior to acceptance to the workshop, participants are required to fulfill the following requirements:

- Have access to e-mail facilities and an internet connection with properly installed World-Wide-Web (WWW) navigator/browser (i.e., Netscape or Explorer)
- Have a specific training topic/subject for which a curriculum and a set of training modules/learning materials will be developed
- Have collected adequate and relevant technical/subject matter contents or reference materials to be packaged into the above-mentioned training curriculum/module
- Have a team of co-workers at the home base institution who will assist and collaborate in planning and developing the above-mentioned training curriculum and/or module
- Have the participant and his/her Institution's Director agree that the training curriculum and materials will be used immediately in a training course offered by the institution
- Be fluent in English, as all communications and instructions will be in English.
Training Design

The following methods and procedures are employed as part of the training design of the workshop:

Phase 1: A One-month Pre-Workshop Internet/Web-based Briefing and Discussion (at own institution/home base). The following activities are carried out:

(i) A pre-workshop website is made available for the participants to be briefed on the workshop objectives, programs/activities, working procedures and preparatory tasks to be undertaken before departing for the Asian Institute of Technology in Thailand. Most workshop reading materials and other reference documents are made available through the website, including relevant audio-visual/PowerPoint presentation materials.

(ii) A virtual pre-workshop discussion forum is also organized, through the Internet/E-mail and/or Website, to obtain the participants' "feed-forward" information or inputs regarding their training needs and suggested topics/issues to be covered during the Phase 2 activities.

Phase 2: Peer Learning and Group Training Activities (3 weeks at CEC/AIT, Bangkok, Thailand). For this phase, the participants will discuss, learn and/or practice the following:

(i) Alternative strategies/models, critical steps and methodological principles of instructional design and training curriculum development based on recent research findings and literature reviews on adult learning processes and methods, including relevant lessons learned, best practices and practical experiences from in-service training and/or professional development training programs.

(ii) Practical, hands-on exercises in preparing training modules and learning materials, as well as in platform skills (i.e., presentation and facilitation, and other training delivery methods). Important principles and procedures in writing training modules, including the essential components, timing, sequencing, formatting, layout, training aids, etc are covered. Participants are also required to write a complete training module for at least a three-hour training session, which is used as a proto-type for developing his/her actual training module during Phase 3.
(iii) Internet/Web-based distance learning technology applications and methods are demonstrated to support the training process and learning activities. It is focused on the concepts and implementation procedures of the Distance Mentoring System (through on-line coaching) which are used to facilitate and support the participants' work during Phase 3. Actual demonstrations and hands-on training for participants in using a computer and relevant software are also conducted. In addition, a three-day Internet-based Virtual Writeshop (in CEC/AIT's computer laboratory) is organized to allow participants and their assigned coaches to practice working collaboratively in order to develop the above mentioned proto-type training module for a three-hour learning activity. The Virtual Writeshop is used as a method to pre-test the Internet/Web-based Distance Mentoring System and the on-line coaching procedure, and to train the coaches as well as the participants in using the system effectively.

Phase 3: Distance Mentoring by On-line Coaches and Consultants (six months at own institution/home base). Using the Internet/Web-base, distance learning methods and facilities are provided to facilitate and support the participants in their practice of their newly acquired training skills and to develop their training curricula/modules in their respective home base/training institution upon their return. More specifically, the following activities, among others, are carried out during this six-month period:

(i) Each participant is assigned an on-line coach and four to six participants are assigned to a Virtual Working Group which is also supported by on-line consultants (i.e., resource persons with various training methodology specializations). Participants are assigned to a working group based on the training subject matter/topic of interest (i.e., health-related issues, environment, economic management, agriculture, etc.).

(ii) A structured work plan based on an inventory-analysis of specific training competencies is prepared by each participant in consultation with his/her assigned on-line coach, with specific "project" tasks/activities completed by a certain period (e.g., work progress is monitored and reviewed every two-weeks by the on-line coaches, etc.). Reports on the progress and results of the participant's individual work is posted every month through a website so that participants, coaches and consultants can learn from the comments made and help improve each other's work. Participants can at any time request specific comments and advise from his assigned on-line coaches and/or on-line consultants.
(iii) In practicing and completing the project tasks at his/her own training institution, each participant is assisted by at least two or three of his/her colleagues who are subject matter specialists, training materials developers, trainers, etc. This Training Improvement Team would have already developed a training module for at least eighteen learning hours and validated the relevance and appropriateness of the training module contents for the intended target audience of the training course to be offered by their training institution.

(iv) The eighteen-hour training module has to be completed within six months and a report of its development process, including the results and lessons learned from such experiences, is presented during the next meeting at CEC/AIT, Bangkok, Thailand.

Phase 4: Peer Review: Results Demonstration and Experience Sharing

held at CEC/AIT, Bangkok, Thailand, for one week. The following activities are conducted:

(i) Participants review and discuss their training curriculum strategies and the module development process, results and lessons learned from such experiences. Participants are expected to comment on and help further improve each other's training modules.

(ii) Participants also share and discuss their plans for the proper utilization of their proposed training plans, curricula, methods and/or modules, and how they will institutionalize the new approaches to learning to improve the quality of other trainers and that of their training institutions.

Phase 5: Institutionalization Process: Free After-Training Consultation Service. The following activities are undertaken during a three-month period.

(i) On-line coaches and consultants continue to provide free advisory services on an "Advice on Demand" basis to participants who seek such services. They also monitor on a monthly basis the progress and follow-up activities related to the training module utilization and institutionalization process.

(ii) The workshop's website continues to function as a communication center to provide participants with a Virtual Information Networking and On-line Advisory Service as mentioned above. This includes an electronic newsletter or bulletin board where participants, coaches and consultants can share and disseminate relevant news, ideas, updates and progress reports, etc. to facilitate their professional networking activities.
Selection of Participants

As there are only limited seats available, participants are selected based on their training needs, their specific learning goals and the likely benefit of the course to the applicant and his/her organization.

Certification

Participants who satisfactorily complete all the workshop activities and assignments receive a Workshop Completion Certificate which is jointly awarded by EDI/The World Bank, the Continuing Education Center, Asian Institute of Technology and the College of Education, University of Illinois.

Formative Evaluation of the Trainers’ Workshop

An independent process evaluator was appointed by the EDI/World Bank to conduct a three-stage formative evaluation of the different phases of the Trainers’ Workshop. The purpose of the formative evaluation was to elicit feedback from the participants on the various components of the workshop, particularly on the distance delivery mode. It also sought to identify issues and problems related to peer learning, distance mentoring and consultation with on-line coaches and consultants, especially on the implementation of the required activities for Phase 3 of the project.

Feedback from the participants showed that peer learning as a training method has afforded them the opportunity to learn from each other and to share different strategies in tackling and clarifying issues and problems related to the activities they have to implement for their Phase 3 project. Peer learning was also viewed as an effective methodology in learning by sharing experiences through the chat-room and the different conferences provided through the workshop’s website. Through peer learning, most participants were able to articulate and better express their ideas. They were more motivated to solve their problems in an interactive learning environment. However, some participants expressed difficulties in using the workshop’s website. This hampered their ability to communicate and to learn more from the other participants beyond their peer group. These were those who did not gain the necessary mastery of the web tools which were taught at the orientation given during Phase 2.

Distance mentoring was perceived by most of the participants as a good mentoring device for their project activities since they got immediate feedback and assistance from the on-line coaches and consultants on matters related to their Phase 3 projects or sometimes, in areas related to their work. Likewise, on-line coaches facilitated the exchange of information and ideas among the members of the peer learning groups. They provided
useful suggestions and recommendations to the participants on how to proceed better with their project activities. On the whole, the participants felt that their on-line coaches served well as advisers, resource persons and experts to the members of their respective peer groups as well as to the participants from the other peer learning groups.

It is heartening to note the positive results of the first two stages of the workshop evaluation, particularly on the methodology and the distance delivery system. However, it was too early to be conclusive on the effectiveness and efficacy of the methods applied and the delivery system utilized in the trainers' workshop since it is still on-going. The third stage of the formative evaluation is yet to be conducted after the completion of Phase 4.

**Implications for TET**

Since TET is an important component of the social and economic development programs in Asia-Pacific countries, it is essential to improve TET quality and its delivery system to answer the needs of the region for trained personnel in this sector, particularly in the less developed countries. The experiences of the Continuing Education Center, Asian Institute of Technology from the Trainers' Workshop may prove valuable in this regard. The lessons learned thus far may be useful as guidelines in the implementation of adult continuing education programs through peer learning and distance mentoring as alternative delivery systems for TET. The training and learning take place in the participants' workplace and learning is shared among peers. The distance delivery mode combined with peer learning may also be an effective approach when applied to TET programs that are oriented toward problemsolving, skills development and competency-based training.
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