

Critical Reflections on the Introduction of Distance Education in a Small Country in Africa

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Abstract

With the enormous capital and infrastructure costs associated with on-campus higher education, it is little wonder that developing countries wishing to create greater access are increasingly looking at distance education to provide the solution. But does this mean that such countries will adopt a Fordist/industrial model of distance education, or is it possible to develop a post-industrial, post-colonial system more suited to local knowledge, learning, and culture? In this paper, I reflect on the introduction of distance education in a small country in Southern Africa. I describe the first two years of operation of the Institute of Distance Education at the University of Swaziland, and critically reflect on the issues that emerged: (1) using distance education with students straight from school rather than mature-aged students emphasizes the need for on-campus sessions; (2) there are major challenges to face when changing from an on-campus academic culture to a dual mode (on-campus and distance education) one; (3) there are significant staff development issues relating to (2); (4) staff morale issues are extremely important for the success of this type of innovation, especially in the context of ever increasing workloads.

It is impossible to fully understand the experiences and the difficulties involved in the introduction of distance education in Swaziland without considering the broader social, cultural and political contexts. Other small countries that have introduced (or wish to introduce) distance education may well identify with aspects of the account given of the interaction of these elements.

The Context for the Introduction of Distance Education in Swaziland

Swaziland is a landlocked country that shares borders with Mozambique and South Africa. It covers an area of 17,364 square kilometres and is the second smallest country in Africa. It was founded by Bantu peoples from Mozambique in the eighteenth century and became a British

protectorate when colonial rule was established in 1903.

Sobhuza II led Swaziland to independence in 1968. In 1973, proclaiming the rejection of colonial influences and the re-affirmation of Swazi tradition, Sobhuza II repealed the independence constitution, banned political parties and assumed supreme power in the kingdom (Matsebula, 1988,

260). The country continues to be ruled under this 1973 decree as a dual monarchy with a king (currently King Mswati III) and queen mother. The present system of governance is the “Tinkhundla System” whereby members of a parliament are “democratically” elected from some fifty-five constituencies. The king has executive powers, and through an advisory council, appoints a prime minister and cabinet ministers (Government of Swaziland, 1998). The system is described by the ruling aristocracy as “Swaziland’s unique form of democracy”.

The population of Swaziland is approximately 913,000, and the population growth rate is about 2.8 percent per year (Carmichael, 1999, section 2.3.8), which places Swaziland among the fastest growing populations in the world. Subsistence agriculture, which occupies more than 60 percent of the population, contributes nearly 25 percent to gross domestic product. English (in which government business is conducted) and siSwati are the official languages. Sixty-seven percent of the population aged fifteen and over can read and write.

There is one university, the University of Swaziland (UNISWA), with an enrolment of approximately 3000 students. It was to this university that I was appointed in October 1996 as Coordinator of Academic Studies to assist in the establishment of distance education at the newly formed Institute of Distance Education (IDE).

The Institute of Distance Education

The mission of the Institute of Distance Education (located at the Kwaluseni campus of UNISWA) is to create educational and training opportunities for qualified individuals who have been unable, for one reason or another, to undertake conventional university education programmes. The programmes offered by IDE are the same as those offered on campus.

IDE programmes use two modes of teaching: printed materials and face-to-face tutorials. The printed material is written specially by IDE course writers, who are usually the UNISWA lecturers teaching the on-campus version of the programme. Students must also attend approximately twenty-five hours per subject of face-to-face tutorials. Ten to fifteen of these hours occur when the students attend the university for three one-week intensive study sessions with the IDE course lecturers (who are usually the UNISWA lecturers teaching the on-campus version of the programme). The remaining tutorial hours are conducted in the Regional Learning Centres (RLCs) in Manzini and Mbabane by part-time course tutors, recruited from people employed as college lecturers, secondary teachers, and lawyers.

IDE enrolled its first intake of students in August 1996. A total of 150 students registered for the three programmes offered by IDE: BA Humanities (Languages), Diploma in Law, and Diploma in Commerce. Nearly all the students enrolled in the BA were students straight from school, whereas all the students enrolled in the other two programmes were mature-aged and employed. None of these students was given government scholarships (loans). Twenty-five UNISWA course lecturers and thirty external course tutors taught this first intake.

Events, Issues and my Reflections

The secondary and tertiary teaching methods in Swaziland have tended to create dependent learners skilled in surface rather than deep learning (Marton and Saljo, 1976). The members of staff at IDE wanted to change this. We saw the role of academic and other staff employed by IDE as *facilitators of learning*, not *deliverers of education*. So, in our early staff development workshops for course tutors and course lecturers,

we endeavoured to engage the participants by using the student-centred methods we favoured.

We stressed to the participants that we wished them to be “*dialogically involved*” (Freire, 1982) as partners and action-researchers in the distance education project in Swaziland. We wanted them to reflect on their ways of thinking and acting, because “through this process of investigation, the level of critical thinking is raised among all those involved” (Freire, 1982, 30). We tried to establish our roles as “*critical friends*” (Kember, 1998, 57). Unfortunately, although most of the course tutors attended, it was difficult to get the UNISWA course lecturers to attend these workshops.

Attendance by staff at their teaching sessions was also a problem on many occasions. For one of the Saturday study days at the university campus I was dismayed to find that for the Law Year 1 programme only four of the seven course lecturers turned up, and in each of these four classes the students were given a test rather than a lecture or tutorial.

The creation of effective information and communication systems proved to be a major problem for me. I decided that I would use written communication (newsletters and mail-merge letters) both for information purposes and also to try to create a sense of “community” amongst all those staff and students involved with IDE. Since I had no computer in my office, all this had to be done on our home computer and printer. Three weeks after the first mailout to all students, I was surprised to find how few of them had actually received my mail. Subsequent mailouts confirmed that mail was taking at least two weeks to get to those outside the university, and that in far too many cases it never arrived at all.

Communication with the world outside Swaziland was even harder. E-mail and telephone calls from

my office were not possible, since I had neither a computer nor an outside telephone line. We had a computer at home, but we had no telephone line (nor any chance of getting one because of the shortage of lines where we lived).

In August 1997, IDE added a Bachelor of Adult Education to its list of programmes, and registered a second intake of students into the other programmes. As in the previous year, registration was conducted at the beginning of the first study week. But this particular registration exercise was a disaster.

Because a few students in the 1996/7 cohort had not paid all their tuition fees, the University Senate decided that for 1997/8 the full fee of E2500 (instead of the half-fee, as before) should be payable up-front at registration. Unfortunately, this decision was only communicated to the new and continuing students a couple of weeks before registration by means of a notice in the *Observer* newspaper. Since most students did not read this paper, they arrived to register with only half their fee. They were told by the registrar that they would be allowed to register late, but that they would have to pay a late registration fee of E50 per day (one week’s pay for a Swazi housekeeper, half a week’s pay for a gardener) and they would not be allowed to sit in classes or receive teaching material until they had registered. This meant that the majority of the IDE students missed the first study week entirely and did not receive their DE materials for several weeks.

Communication remained a problem. Although I now had an outside line in my office, this was no help for maintaining contact with most of our students. An effective way to communicate with our DE students was to place notices in the independent newspaper, the *Times of Swaziland*. Unfortunately, in 1997 the government decided to forbid parastatal agencies using the *Times* for

advertising. The government maintained that this was a cost cutting exercise, but many people saw it as an attempt to close down the *Times* because it was always outspoken and revealed much of the corruption and abuse in the country. The *Observer* was the only other newspaper. This paper (basically owned by the Royal family) had a very small circulation and so it was not really worth putting notices in there. So I now had difficulty communicating with the students at short notice.

This problem was highlighted when the university graduation ceremony was postponed by one week at short notice because the scheduled date coincided with a traditional Royal ceremony (which was arranged at short notice). The new date for graduation coincided with our IDE study day. So we announced on the radio that the new study day date would be one week earlier than planned. The result was chaos! People turned up for the graduation on our study day, and students turned up for the study day on graduation day. The problem recurred when a teachers' strike (which lasted over four weeks) caused the schools that we used as Regional Learning Centres to be closed. I found it extremely difficult to inform the students of a change of venue at short notice.

November 1997 was an exciting time for everyone in IDE. UNESCO donated the much-needed educational technology hardware: computers, printers, scanner, television, videocassette recorder, and video camera. At last I had a computer on my desk.

The chaotic nature of things in the last four months of 1997 had made it difficult to communicate with the course tutors, let alone organize staff development workshops. It was as a result of this that I decided to publish a newsletter specifically for course tutors and course lecturers, which would contain their

critical reflections on their practices. I hoped that this would facilitate their dialogical involvement with the project and assist in their personal development. I did not obtain a large number of responses (those from course lecturers were very few), but was able to produce and distribute two issues of the *IDEAS Network (Institute of Distance Education Action-research Support Network)* newsletter before I left Swaziland at the end of June 1998.

Staff Reflections

One thing I noted during my time in Swaziland was the reluctance of most course lecturers to commit themselves in writing. I had to communicate with about forty-five course lecturers in the university. I did this by means of mail-merge memos and letters. During the two years that I was at the university I sent out hundreds of written communications, but received back only a handful of replies. Now, is this a function of this being an oral culture, or something more sinister? One course lecturer said to me "don't put anything in writing".

Having said that, I did obtain critical reflections in the form of verbal feedback from many of the course lecturers and written feedback from a few. One course lecturer wrote about the students' dependent learning style:

The students appear not to understand the whole concept of IDE. They expect a lot from the tutors when they should contribute themselves towards their own professional development.

And another course lecturer wrote that the students:

Should take it upon themselves to do the reading and come for tutorials only to ask questions and then expand wherever possible. However, most

but not all of the students seem to look to the tutors to give them lectures. Yet we come prepared to assist them to understand better what they have read on their own, not to give a lecture.

The course tutors made similar written comments about the students:

Poor attendance and lack of confidence in general.

There was a general lack of reading and they show a degree of laxity, that is, they seem to think everything is easy.

Students do not do assignments and always do not have questions to ask. They look forward to tutor to lecture or explain all concepts.

One course lecturer verbally commented on the absence of critical thinking in the work of the first year students, both on and off campus. She laid the blame for this on the culture of obedience and respect for authority in which most Swazis are reared (this lecturer was herself a Swazi).

Many of the course lecturers complained about the increase in their workloads caused by the IDE teaching. One lecturer said that she was taking five courses that year. She felt that she had to fit dealing with IDE in whenever she could, rather than seeing it as of equal priority to her on-campus commitments.

Student Reflections

At the end of 1997, I asked students to comment on any aspect of their studies with IDE. Sixty-four students wrote comments for me.

Over 20 percent of the respondents raised financial concerns. Some students commented on the cost of bus fares, and one Humanities student used this as a reason to be transferred to the on-

campus programme, saying “we cannot afford the bus fare from Mbabane to Kwaluseni.” One Adult Education student commented on the method of payment of fees to the university, saying “paying tuition fees on cash basis is very strenuous.”

Over 40 percent of the respondents were concerned about course tutors and course lecturers missing sessions. Some of the respondents requested compensation for lost study days. One Adult Education student commented about “going to RLC for tutorials only to find that tutors are not there. We would like compensation for this.” One Humanities student pointed out that “during the strike, we did not attend some classes due to the fact that the classes were locked in the centres. So please compensate us for this missed days.”

Over 20 percent of the respondents wanted to transfer to the on-campus programme. All these students were enrolled in the BA programme and had originally applied for the on-campus programme, but owing to a shortage of places had not been successful. One Humanities student reported, “we would like to transfer as full time students since some of us come from distant places. Secondly, it is tough to make it since we are far from a library source.”

Sixteen percent of the respondents commented on the need for more face-to-face study time, especially as the examinations approached, as this Law student comments:

As we are new students its better for us to meet the requirement of our lecturers and enjoy the course if the university can increase both number and length of our tutorials. This because other lecturers do not want to make an appointment with. And it is difficult to solve the problems we encounter in the course. As a result we are behind and exams are near.

Nearly a third of the respondents expressed their need to be treated better by the university and staff. One Humanities student requested that they “have all the benefits that are given to full time students”. Other students wrote of their concern about the lack of consideration and respect from some staff. One second year Law student asked us to “employ lecturers who are legally bound to lecture instead of ones who are doing us a favour or a sacrifice”.

Ten percent of the respondents commented on communication problems between IDE and students. One Adult Education student commented:

Sometimes we are not informed on time of changes of RLC dates. This becomes expensive because we travel for nothing. IDE must use even the *Times of Swaziland* since some of us don't buy the *Observer*.

Concluding Remarks

The administrative and academic culture of UNISWA is like that of so many single mode universities in that the administrative and teaching functions presuppose that students with government scholarships (loans) will attend university for five days a week between 9.00 a.m. and 5.00 p.m. for approximately thirty-five weeks of the year. The staff and students of IDE challenged all these presuppositions and experienced considerable difficulties as a result, for example in relation to the payment of tuition fees at registration. Guy (1994, 103) notes a similar situation in Papua New Guinea, where his students commented “consistently about the process of distance education and the contradictions and tensions between their realities and the bureaucratic demands of the Institute”.

Fung and Carr (2000, 44) found that Hong Kong distance education students valued highly

“academic support from tutors which enhances their understanding of the course materials and provides general guidance on their assignments” and showed “a desire for a largely directive approach in tutorials”. This was also true of the IDE students, but they seemed overly dependent on a directive approach in face-to-face teaching, and so showed some reluctance to engage with the academic culture of IDE.

Throughout my time in Swaziland, communication with students and staff remained a major problem. I was unable to find an effective way to transmit information to the students; I was unable to get effective feedback from the course lecturers; and I was unable to create an effective mechanism for communication between course lecturers and course tutors. To some extent, these communication problems resulted from inadequate communications technology or infrastructure. But the communication problems with and between staff were largely due to the attitudes and levels of motivation of the participants.

Establishing effective communication among staff and changing the culture of an institution require levels of motivation and goodwill that are not apparent in UNISWA. In order to understand this, we have to look further afield than the university administration. The cultures within which students learn and how to fit these factors with distance education pedagogy and curriculum are issues that are particularly important for small countries. In many countries, education is seen as a way of gaining significant advantage in a competitive society that values academic success. In Swaziland, education is seen as a way to earn a living in a society that rewards birthright rather than ability. This situation is detrimental to motivation in students and staff alike.

In order to understand the changes in so many of the world's higher education institutions, we must

take into account the broader economic, political, social and technological changes. There is recognition by many that African institutions of higher education also need to transform in response to these broader world changes (Otaala, 1997), but more particularly that they need to change to be in line with the continent's new political and socio-economic environment. In the case of the University of Swaziland, the necessary transformation is not helped by the political situation in Swaziland.

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