

# MODELS OF DELIVERY IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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## Introduction

It is increasingly recognised that open and distance approaches to education and training can result in very different types of provision. While the individual components of different education and training programmes may be very similar, the variations in their sequencing and balance within the delivery of a complete training programme can result in very different learning experiences for the participants. The question is how can we assess whether different types of delivery are differentially effective for different types of learner.

This paper draws on the findings of a recent UK study of the effectiveness of open and flexible approaches to training of basic grade staff (Calder, McCollum et al. 1995). The three brief case studies which now follow are illustrative of the differences found in the way vocational education and training was delivered.

## Three case studies

### 1. Inland Revenue

Many large national organisations need to continually train and up-date staff at basic clerical levels. The Inland Revenue offer a wide range of courses, many of which use open and distance approaches. One course which has to be taken by newly appointed supervisors of clerical staff is the Management Foundation Course. Participants can therefore range from new entrants freshly recruited to the service through to highly experienced clerical staff who have recently been promoted.

The course is designed to be taken in three phases over a period of six months. The course designers see the main teaching as text-based linked to residential workshops and integrated with participants' own work practice. There are three sets of one-week residential workshops. Prior to each workshop, booklets are sent to participants for them to study as preparation. The booklets are seen as carrying the main 'essential knowledge' content of the course. There is no formal assessment associated with the course.

### 2. Safeways

Training is seen as a major management responsibility in national retail companies. The Safeways chain of retail food supermarkets employs approximately 60,000 staff in over 350 stores. The training of newly recruited full-time retail staff is carried out through Safeways' own 'Headstart' training programme. Prior to appointment, applicants are given a short test as well as a job interview. Successful applicants then embark on a two phase training programme. The first phase is a two-day group induction led by a senior manager from the store. The induction follows a tightly designed schedule, with the manager who is leading the programme using a detailed 'Tutor Induction Guide'.

The second phase of the induction lasts about three months. Trainees are given a structured programme of work experience, and during this period, they have to work through a series of specially designed workbooks which cover the core skills and basic knowledge required by retail staff. The same specially devised record and assessment materials are used nationally to ensure that they all acquire the same competencies. A checklist of competencies which they have to acquire is provided in a form designed especially for ease of reference. Their own supervisor acts as their 'mentor', and is responsible for following clearly set procedures for monitoring their progress, supervising their training and for competency assessment. There is some flexibility in that the length of training may vary to allow both for variations in the rate of progress of individual trainees, and to allow for variations in local circumstances. On successful completion of the training, staff receive an increase in their wages.

### 3. Plymouth FE College

Much of the vocational education and training in the UK is provided by Colleges of Further Education. These colleges take full and part-time students from the age of 16 years. Open and distance approaches to education and training are increasingly being used by these institutions. Plymouth FE College is one of the biggest in the South West of England. Among the many courses it runs which use open and distance approaches is the 'GCSE Maths'. This course is a one to two year course designed primarily for youngsters, mainly aged between 16 to 18 years who are retaking the GCSE having previously failed to get the grades they want. Core teaching is provided through a series of 35 self-study workbooks bought in by the college. These workbooks include self-assessment exercises and worked answers. Support is provided via timetabled workshops. These consist of timetabled periods during which a tutor is available in the workshop room to provide one-to-one help to individual students. Students taking the course are timetabled to study here for four hours a week, working individually through the workbooks, and seeking the tutor's help, (or the help of other students), as and when needed. Overall monitoring of the progress of individual students is carried out by the tutor, and summative assessment is through the public examination system.

#### Problems of comparison

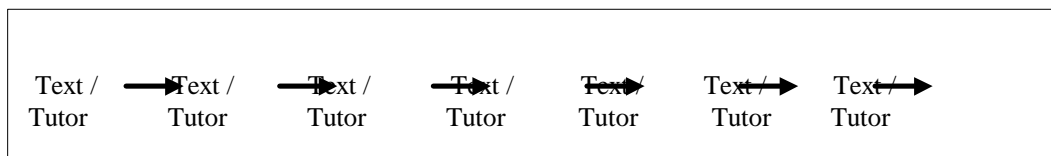
The three case studies outlined above illustrate the problems involved in trying to compare the relative effectiveness of different kinds of open and distance provision. The literature on learning effectiveness of open and distance provision has tended to concentrate on studies which compare distance education with conventional programmes (see (Moore and Thompson 1990), (Russell 1992)). These have suggested conclusively that "students learn equally well with each technology and learn as well as their on-campus, face-to-face counterparts" (Russell 1992). Other studies have tried to examine the factors which contribute to the success of individual students in open and distance programmes. These studies suggest reasons such as "the students' readiness for self-directed learning, their competence with study skills, maturity, motivation and previous experience of different types of learning provision." (Calder, McCollum et al. 1995), (Hicks Price, Miller Swartz et al. 1983), (Lewis 1983)).

How can this research help in the assessment of the effectiveness of different types of delivery of open and distance training and education? The technologies used in the training and education programmes operated by the providers in each of the three case studies above were very similar. Each used text-based material for its core teaching, and each provided support to course participants. However the participants' readiness for self-directed learning appeared to vary considerably.

Model 1 below shows Case Study 1 - the programme operated by the Inland Revenue - in diagrammatic form. This form of representation shows the relationships between the different components and the way in which they are sequenced.

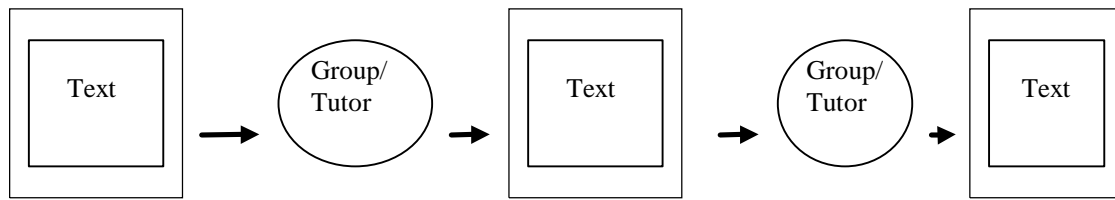
#### Model 1: Inland Revenue 'New Supervisors' training programme

The diagram for Model 1 shows how the programme is designed such that the text component is expected to be studied in a work setting (represented by the dotted rectangles), while the group work with a tutor takes place elsewhere. The programme also starts with each participant receiving a set of texts to study prior to their first residential week of training.



#### Model 2: Safeways 'Headstart' training programme

The contrast between Model 1 and Model 2 - the programme operated by the Safeways chain - is clear. First, the model used in the Safeways programme locates all the training activity in the workplace (represented by the large dotted rectangle). Second, the programme starts off with a phase of group-work, before trainees start to work with their mentors, and use their training materials.



Model 3 shown below - the GCSE Maths course in Plymouth FE college - again has some similarities but also some contrasts.

### Model 3: Maths Workshop

This time, none of the programme is undertaken in a work setting. As with the second phase in the Safeways training programme, text is studied on a continuing basis, and tutors, as opposed to mentors, are available for help and to monitor progress on a regular basis. However there is no group work as such, although the workshop format enables students to sit together while studying.

#### Key factors

The comparisons of the three models derived from the three case studies focus on the context for the training - whether it was workplace-based or not. the input to the programmes in terms of teaching components and type of support made available. the actual process of delivery in terms of the sequencing of the different components and forms of support and their location.

One factor missing from this set of comparisons is the output. Although education and training provided by public providers has traditionally carried with it some form of summative assessment, this has not been the case with in-company training. The primary concern of those responsible for training for basic grade personnel has been the acquisition of necessary competencies by trainees rather than the acquisition of a qualification which attests to their level of competence. Thus, although there are clear performance measures for the FE College GCSE course in terms of grades achieved by course participants, there are no equivalent measures for participants on the in-company courses. However it should be noted that increasingly, the situation nationally is becoming rather less clear cut as more companies start to offer their employees the opportunity of completing NVQs and as Colleges of FE provide more non-award bearing training (Calder and Newton 1995).

We are left then with the information about context, input and process from which to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of particular models of delivery for different types of learners. The participants on the courses in the case studies we have looked at range from youngsters of 16 and 17 with rather fragile motivation, few study skills and little if any experience of formal learning other than through school, to mature adults who are relatively confident in their ability to acquire basic level knowledge and skills and who have considerable experience of different forms of learning. This means that some course participants will be highly dependent on support from tutors or mentors for the relevance and usefulness of the goals of their course to be clarified, and for their confidence to be built up. Equally some course participants will have a considerable need for guidance through the course content, and help in understanding the assignments and the criteria being used to assess acceptable performance.

So what sort of learners are our case studies designed for? To what extent do the different models allow for variations in learner dependency and in their need for direction through the course content and assignment work?

The assumptions underpinning Model 1, the Inland Revenue Programme, are unclear. So for example, sending information - heavy booklets for independent study in the workplace by course participants prior to any initial induction or support appears to assume that participants will have the necessary study skills and motivation to undertake the necessary work. In contrast, the subsequent provision of three extended periods of residential workshops for tutor-led group work appears to assume a relatively high level of dependency. In practice, a feature of the comments by tutors on this course was their

concern about the lack of preparation undertaken by participants prior to their residential experience. This would seem to support the assumption that participants would tend to have a relatively high level of dependency on support for motivation on course goals and help with study skills. The extent to which these participants would be self-directed is unclear, given that they comprise such a mixed group in terms of relevant previous experience in the service.

The assumptions behind Model 2 - the training programme operated by the Safeways Supermarket chain - are, in contrast, both more cautious and more consistent. The provision of an initial two-day group induction suggests that participants are assumed to be highly dependent upon support and guidance about the goals of their training and about the way their progress will be assessed. Its continuing use both of highly structured learning materials together with mentor support suggests that the course designers have assumed a possible continuing high level of dependency on personal support and guidance on progress, as well as a continuing need for detailed guidance on competencies to be acquired and on assessment criteria. Undoubtedly for some participants, this continuing high level of support may not be strictly necessary as they become more skilled as independent learners. It is unknown however whether their mentors modify the amount of input they make as they see their trainees' level of dependency on them reducing.

Finally, the designers of Model 3 - the GCSE Workshop operated by Plymouth FE College - appear to assume a medium to high level of learner dependency throughout the course. Although a high level of support availability is scheduled within the study timetable, contacts between learners and tutors are initiated by the learner, although the tutor retains responsibility for monitoring learners' progress. However the lack of any initial induction into this form of study could create problems with initial motivation and learner awareness of the problems associated with this form of study. The high level of instructional design within the teaching materials similarly assumes a medium to low level of self-directedness.

### **Discussion**

The three models identified from the three case studies detailed in this paper are not the only ones occurring in distance education and training. In the study from which these case studies were taken, six different models were identified (see (Calder and McCollum 1998)). A key feature in two of these other models was that support for the learner lessened over time, although the option to access support at a later stage remained. An advantage of this approach is that it recognises that learners and trainees do become more skilled as learners as they progress through training. In other words they become more self-directed. Thus the costs of providing support can be reduced without putting at a disadvantage those learners who may continue to need a higher level of support.

A common element in the three models identified above and indeed, of the other models mentioned, was the relatively high level of support made available to learners. For vocational education and training for basic grade staff, it is clear that learner support is seen by both in-company providers and public providers as an essential component of training which uses open or distance approaches. The literature makes clear the costs, in terms of student drop-out and failure, of systems which do not have accessible and substantial support built in. The use of mentors in the Safeways case-study shows how the costs associated with trainee support can be minimised when training is based in the workplace. However it should be pointed out that the mentors in turn need training to prepare them for this role, as well as support from their own line managers during periods when they exercise this responsibility.

The use of these models however is only of real use if they are generalisable. That is, if they can be used to represent a number of different programmes and if they help in identifying design weaknesses in their delivery systems. At the time of writing, the work of testing out these models remains to be done. Further research is needed to identify the most common models of delivery in open and distance education, and to test out their relative effectiveness with different types of learners. The common aim for all education and training providers is, after all, that participants emerge from their courses as learners who are more self-directed and less dependent on external support as a result of their participation. In other words, as people who have moved forward in being able to take responsibility for their own further learning.

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