Dimensions of Open and Distance Learning: A Case Study on Developments at the School of Health Studies, University of Bradford, UK

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Abstract

Changing context

The Dearing Report
Research & Evaluation
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Changing context

Changing environmental, professional and technological conditions have led to increasing demands upon and from our clients within the National Health Service (NHS)(DOH 1997). In turn, these demands have led to the development of a flexible provision including open and distance learning delivered at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The changing demands upon our customers have included the technological advances that are discussed by Benson et al (1998); these have also changed the demands made upon teaching staff within the division. A changing clientele of mature students, predominantly women of middle age (Kenworthy & Dearnley 1998), who are already professionals and have practised for many years, has also contributed to the growth of our flexible provision. This has placed demands upon staff for changing and developing the skills required to support such students. It is hardly surprising therefore, that staff need supporting too, to ease them through these transitions and their uncertainties. Developmental work within the division has not overlooked them.

The Dearing Report

The Dearing Report (1997) identified a need to encourage a society committed to life long learning (DFEE 1998, ENB 1998). Open and distance learning methodologies promote the notions of autonomy and independence, sentiments that underpin the skills of life long learning. However, such intent is not only to be encouraged in students. In pursuit of lifelong learning ourselves, we have each become involved in various developmental projects within the department that contribute to the quality of our provision and our own professional development. One such project is an ongoing action research study into support systems for the supporters of open and distance learning students (Dearnley and Gatecliffe 1998).

Research & Evaluation

Action Research (Elliot 1991, McNiff 1988 ) has become integral to our role as tutors, its reflective and evaluative nature allows its easy application and contributes to the ongoing quality review of the programmes offered. A second action research study currently ongoing within the division is an evaluation of telephone assessment schedules that have been incorporated into the distance learning programmes (Benson & Cassidy 1998). Telephone assessments are one form of response to the growing range of delivery systems operating within the division. To reflect these changes, assessment methods had to be reviewed for their suitability to the courses in which they were ensconced. As the departmental philosophy of education evolved into one of increasing openness, flexibility and equality, so the assessment methods employed had to be examined with a view to these underpinning dimensions. Telephone assessments were a product of that review.

Further changes to assessment which have occurred as a direct result of the changing nature of our
provision are described by Benson et al (1998) in their account of introducing work based projects into health care management programmes. It has become evident that this form of assessment contributes to organisational development in addition to the personal growth experienced by the student. It would therefore seem that changes in the provision of health care education are having a direct and positive effect on health care delivery.

**The contributions to this special issue**

The positive effects of our open learning provisions are supported by feedback from service managers. They offer clear indications that students who have undertaken programmes delivered by these flexible approaches are indeed taking the skills of independent learners back into the workplace. The following collection of works suggest that the challenges of a changing world are being discovered and embraced both by health care professionals and those employed to facilitate their professional development. Read the following contributions to get informed about the specific work done in our field:

- Keeping the customer satisfied: responding to changing social demands at the university of Bradford. Lynda Gatecliffe & Annie Persaud
- Women taking health care education forwards Doreen Kenworthy and Christine Dearnley University of Bradford, UK.
- Human resource development using work based projects in open learning programmes in UK health care. Lawrence Benson, University of Bradford, Lynda Gatecliffe, University of Bradford and Graham Thurgood, University of Huddersfield, United Kingdom
- Converging traditional assessment philosophies with open assessment philosophies - introducing a low tech. Solution through action research Andrea Cassidy - Lecturer and Lawrence Benson - Lecturer - School of Health Studies, University of Bradford, United Kingdom
- Supporting supporters in open and distance learning Christine Dearnley and Lynda Gatecliffe, The University of Bradford, UK
- Preparing a web site to support pedagogical content for health service managers and nurses. Lawrence Benson, Andrea Cassidy and Nick Bowles, Lecturers, School of Health Studies, University of Bradford, United Kingdom

**References**


Benson L, Cassidy A Bowles N., *Preparing a web site to support pedagogical content for health service managers and nurses*. European Distance Education Network Conference, University of Bologna, June 24-26. Pp631-634


