Changing clients and changing delivery modes

Some institutional and individual lessons from distance education

Y.L. Jack Lam

Changing clientele compels universities across the world to explore alternative out-reach activities. Technological advances permit a wider latitude and a more innovative device in serving students. In the context of attempting to achieve 'internal efficiency', i.e. improving the quality of students' learning experiences, rather than 'operational efficiency', a Canadian University undertook a rigorous review of courses delivered by different modes. This article documents a part of this effort by scrutinising three modes of delivery of one course taught by the same instructor. Major areas where institutions of higher learning and individual instructors should focus were identified. Evidently, without recognising and learning from the shortcomings and oversights, and without cherishing the spirit of risk-taking in new ventures, the mandate of promoting equality of educational opportunity and equality will not be able to be achieved.

Propelled by two complementary trends, distance education has become a permanent feature in an increasing number of institutes of higher learning. One of these trends is the changing composition of student populations at the colleges and universities.

According to some scholars interested in this domain (e.g. Galusha, 1998), in the future adult learners will constitute a majority in higher education. Further, most of these adult learners are women, in the age range of 25-45, living in urban centres, and doing their studies on a part-time basis (e.g. Owen & Hotchkis, 1991). With the arrival of these adult learners, the nature of the university’s clientele becomes more cosmopolitan and their demands more divergent. The traditional fashion of course/program delivery is no longer adequate.

The other trend is the strengthening of institutional out-reach activities. In contrast to the earlier notion that universities and colleges are ‘ivory towers’, insulated from community demands, many have become so sensitised to external expectations that they have gone out their way to accommodate emerging needs. Since the 1960s and 70s, open and distance universities have been created to increase ‘accessibility’ by removing the barriers of time, space and, to some degree, educational background and income (Moran, 1991). Even for those more conventional institutions, distance education has become commonplace.
These two trends do not occur accidentally. Indeed, for those who participate or re-participate in university education, many are motivated by the need to increase self-esteem and self-confidence. Women express their desire for greater self-improvement and intellectual stimulation while men look for higher professional qualification and second career preparation (Owen & Hotchkis, 1991). In many respects, the motivation of women and men for advanced studies mirror societal changes. Gender equality, greater social mobility, recognition and rewards coupled with the multiplicity of career changes necessitate more people to engage in an on-going self-improvement and life-long learning.

From the institutional perspective, the need for greater accountability to the public has either transformed or reaffirmed their mandates to be more responsive to external demands. Technological advances further obscure their territorial monopoly on the traditional constituency and focus the organisation's attention on distance education as a means of waging the battle for organisational survival. At the same time, these advances make it possible for universities to be more creative in their efforts to accommodate students who traditionally have not had access to higher education.

The merging of these two trends breaks individual and organisational inertia and provides opportunities for experimenting with alternative methods of course delivery. Accompanying the implementation of diverse patterns of course delivery is the need to assess their relative effectiveness. In such a context, a rural university in Canada undertook a systematic review of all courses delivered off campus. This article documents a portion of this effort by focusing on the assessment of one course after it had been delivered in different fashions. Strategically, outcomes from the overview should form the basis for appraising the relative success of the current efforts and for mapping possible future expansion along some new direction.

THREE METHODS OF COURSE DELIVERY

To ensure that the comparison of course delivery modes was fair and equitable, only one professional course taught by the same instructor was examined. Extraneous factors that might have influenced the assessment outcomes were therefore minimised. The delivery patterns under scrutiny were: (1) on-campus evening instruction; (2) northern on-site course delivery; and (3) distance education.

On-campus evening instruction refers to the regular classes scheduled after school hours for principals and teachers completing their graduate programs. Each class lasted for three hours and it was held once a week. Twenty principals and teachers aspiring to be school administrators formally registered for the course.

Northern on-site course delivery involved travelling to a northern teaching centre. Here, principals and teachers from neighbouring school divisions/districts congregated and the course was offered over four weekends spanning four months. During those scheduled weekends, intensive instruction took place, with three hours on Friday nights and six hours on Saturdays. Altogether, there were 16 students taking part in this mode of course delivery.
Distance education involved the delivery of the course to 39 students residing in eight communities in extreme northern and remote locations. In preparation for studying the course delivered in this way, each student received a study guide in advance outlining how the course was going to proceed. In brief, it contained course objectives, course content, a reading list for each lecture session, assignments, dates when assignments were due, supplementary exercises, an explanation of the course assessment scheme, and information on university library facilities and contact phone numbers in case they needed to secure additional resources. As suggested in the literature (e.g. Kearsley & Lynch, 1996), having the content, study guide and completion dates in advance greatly affected students' attitudes towards distance learning. Each student also received the reading materials to go with the study guide. Each community received a set of lecture tapes that covered the entire course. To support the progress of the course, teleconferencing was arranged every second week so that the instructor could interact with students concerning questions arising from their study. Additionally, students were encouraged to contact the instructor by phone or by e-mail if they ran into specific individual problems.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to improve the quality of course delivery, formal assessment was undertaken. To guide the formal assessment, two main questions were raised:

- What were the major differences, if any, that accounted for variations in the assessment of participants' learning experiences?
- What were the major reasons that accounted for participants not being able to complete their studies?

The first question was prompted by the institutional concern for equity of course quality, as modes of delivery should not unduly affect students' learning experiences. This concern for quality of learning experiences or "internal efficiency" as Sparkes (1985) describes it, signifies a major departure from the earlier obsession of "operational efficiency" that Lam & Paulet observe (1990) in the field of distance education. In this context, assessment of alternative modes of delivery reaches another level of maturity.

The second question was triggered by the general concern about students dropping out of their course. This attrition problem is particularly serious when it involves distance learning courses (e.g. Coldaway & Spencer, 1980). To the individual learners, attrition represents having insurmountable personal difficulty that is peripheral to the course. Alternatively, students may be disillusioned with their learning experiences. If this is so it should be a major concern for the institution involved. Whatever the reason, the problem entails a waste of valuable resources as so much preparation has already gone into the planning, design and implementation processes before a course is mounted for an alternative mode of delivery. If attrition is brought about by disillusionment of learning experiences, then the credibility of the institution can also be at stake.
COURSE ASSESSMENT

Prior to comparing the effectiveness of the three modes of course delivery, head counts of those who dropped out from the course were undertaken. Of the campus group, two students, or 10 percent of the group, withdrew before the course was completed. Of the northern on-site group, four individuals, or 25 percent of the class, discontinued before the course was fully delivered. Of the distance education group, 16 participants, or 41 percent, failed to complete the course requirements.

An extensive search of literature (e.g. Altrichter, 1989; Care, 1996; Kearsley & Lynch, 1996; Miller, 1997) was undertaken to construct a relative comprehensive conceptual scheme to guide the preparation of research instruments. Course delivery was broken into content, structure, materials, instructional methodologies, pace of progression, grading system, satisfaction with the instructor and with the learning experiences, and the perceived course utility for professional development. Aside from the direct learning experiences that individual students underwent, it was believed that assessment of the course would be subtly influenced by three sets of variables, namely, by intervening psychological factors, by comparison with previous courses delivered in similar fashions, and by personal or contextual variables (see Figure 1).

Included in the intervening psychological factors were:

1. Learners’ purpose(s) for enrolling in the course;
2. How much importance they attached to completing the course;
3. What type of support groups students had in undertaking the study;
4. To what extent the regular course schedule interrupted their personal life;
5. The degree of difficulty they encountered in digesting the course content; and,
6. The propensity to drop out from the course.

Included in the list of factors derived from prior learning of other courses through similar delivery pattern were:

1. Relative quality of the course compared with previous ones;
2. Relative quality of support system associated with the current course;
3. Relative availability of the instructor;
4. Relative difficulty of reading materials;
5. Relative difficulty of assignments; and
6. Assessment scheme of the course compared with previous ones.

Included in the list of personal and contextual variables were:

1. Gender;
2. Position;
3. Level of grades taught;
4. Administrative/teaching experiences,
5. Communities; and
6. Performance in the course.
Figure 1. Theoretical Framework for Assessing Different Modes of Course Delivery
Based on this conceptual scheme, two survey instruments were prepared: one for those who completed the course and one for those who dropped out prior to completion of the course. The survey questionnaire for those who completed the course consisted of four sections. The first section consisted of items that probed into participants' backgrounds. The second examined the psychological factors that influenced their relative determination to take or to complete the course. The third section dealt with their course assessment. The fourth section provided chances for comparing the course with those the participants might have taken earlier. Most of the items were accompanied by five-point Likert-style scales. Additionally, space was provided in each item for students to explain or elaborate on their ratings.

In the attrition questionnaire, the first two sections were the same as the first instrument in that both the background and psychological data were sought. The third section explored the reasons that accounted for the learners withdrawing from the study. Most items were accompanied by nominal scales, with plenty of room for comments and additional reflection.

The two sets of instruments were sent to the participants by the Technological Unit (the reorganised Department of Extension) of the university after the course was completed. For those that failed to return the questionnaire after the prescribed deadline, a second round of data collection was conducted. Ninety percent of the participants from the on-campus class, 70 percent of learners involved in the on-site course delivery, and about 50 percent of learners in the distance education course returned the questionnaires with useful information. In term of the actual numbers, 18 students from the campus group returned the questionnaires (16 who had completed the course and two who had not). In the northern group, 12 provided the data sought (10 who had completed the course and two who had not). In the distance education group, 20 students completed the survey questionnaire (16 who had completed the course and four who had not). Thus, in total, 42 questionnaires from the three groups who completed the course and eight questionnaires from the attrition group were included in the data analyses.

DATA ANALYSIS

Perceived differences in three modes of course delivery

To respond to the first question, concerning whether there was any variation in the learning experiences among students exposed to three different modes of course delivery, discriminant analysis was employed. Included in the list were all the pertinent factors described in the conceptual model (see Figure 1). The results indicate that one function was found to be significant at 0.05 level (see Table 1). Close scrutiny indicated that this function was associated with groups, as group centroids were located away from each other. This suggested that modes of course delivery did indeed make a difference in the learning experiences of students.
Table 1. Discriminant analysis of three modes of course delivery

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Eigen values</th>
<th>% of variance</th>
<th>Canonical correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.364</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>.838</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>.553</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>.597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilk's Lambda</td>
<td>chi square</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>sig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.191</td>
<td>44.49</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Centroids (Function 1)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>-1.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To detect factors that accounted for such a variation in learning experiences, the researcher had chosen those variables having coefficient values of greater than .4, and ranked these relatively important variables in terms of the magnitudes of the coefficient (see Table 2). Interestingly, all intervening psychological factors, comparable variables, personal and contextual factors were found to have little discriminating power, suggesting that participants of the course delivered via different modes were not dissimilar in motivation, experiences and personal and professional backgrounds. On the other hand, items pertaining to assessment of the course turned out to be important factors. ‘Satisfaction with the instructor’ was found to be the top discriminating factor. This was followed by ‘course structure’, ‘course utility’, ‘performance’, ‘pace’, ‘instructional approach’, ‘course materials’, ‘tendencies to drop out’ and, lastly, ‘grading system’.

Table 2. Discriminating factors distinguishing three modes of course delivery (standardised canonical discriminant function coefficients)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Important variable*</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Coefficient value</th>
<th>Rank</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X25</td>
<td>Tendencies to</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X27</td>
<td>Course utility</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X29</td>
<td>Course structure</td>
<td>-1.12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X30</td>
<td>Course materials</td>
<td>-.45</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X32</td>
<td>Pace</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X34</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X35</td>
<td>Grading system</td>
<td>-.40</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X36</td>
<td>Instructional approach</td>
<td>-.48</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X40</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
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</table>

* Coefficient > .40
To make sense out of these rankings, additional references to participants' specific comments were made. As these students were quite vocal in relaying their learning experiences in this course, only sample comments that seemed best to reflect differences among the three groups of students were reported here for discussion. These areas of differences are presented below in order of their ranking importance.

Students' comments on the nature of the course were quite revealing. From the regular classes we heard comments like "the course was interesting and informative. It was quite a heavy workload and demanding." From those receiving on-site delivery in the north, a typical comment read, "the course covered a lot of materials. Having a professor deliver a course is important to me. Four concentrated weekends of delivery is a bit heavy." For those receiving the course by distance delivery, a comment like "it involved a lot of reading ... sometimes, we ran out of time (during the teleconferencing) ... some parts of the course was a little too deep" seemed to typify the feeling of many participants.

While all students perceived the course to be heavy, students in the regular classes seemed more capable of understanding the general course objectives since they had more chances interacting with the instructor. Northern students appreciated the personal presence of the instructor, but they were still subject to the pressure of covering the entire course in a very concentrated time schedule. The students in the distance education seemed to be the most disadvantaged, given that many felt they had insufficient time to discuss and digest the heavy readings required by the course.

When it came to the 'instructor', the most important factor that discriminated learning experiences among the three groups, students from the regular class remarked, "the instructor's knowledge, humour and willingness to help made this a very enjoyable class". "I enjoy the instructor and his commitment to his beliefs on education, even if they differ at times from my own". Northern students commented, "the instructor was knowledgeable, prepared, interesting and friendly".

It seems evident from these comments that, while students' feelings about the instructor were generally positive, there were subtle degrees of differences in the depth that the students came to know the instructor. For the regular class, a greater and more relaxed time frame of interpersonal contacts allowed the students to enjoy the class and to feel comfortable to challenge the instructor's viewpoints. For the northern students, understanding of the instructor was confined to the readily apparent behaviours as there were less time for developing a genuine student-instructor relationship. For the distance education students, understanding of the instructor was further constrained by the limited contact time during teleconferencing and the time set aside for personal consultation.

In assessing the course structure, one on-campus student stated, "the course was highly theoretical and coherent. It is well structured." For northern students, a comment like "four concentrated weekends of delivery is heavy; I'm satisfied within the constraints of a northern setting" seemed to summarise the feeling. Distance education students remarked, "the course structure was clearly organised. However, a few too many readings".
Apparently, on-campus students were able to piece together components of the course and make sense of the conceptual linkages that unified the course. Northern students had the challenging task of making sense of the materials covered in a highly concentrated manner. By reading between the lines, one senses that the mode of delivery was not ideal. Nonetheless, students saw no other alternatives and had to be content with the current arrangement. For the distance education students, while the course structure was clear, they had to struggle with many reading assignments, leading sometimes to feeling overwhelmed.

In assessing the course utility, one regular student commented, "I came away with a lot of information (which) I did not have and can put it into practice". In contrast, a northern student reflected, "the course was a little threatening. I appreciate the university's effort to provide courses in the north and professors' willingness to be a part of this progressive approach." To the distance education student, a typical response was, "the up-to-date information was good ... current issues were useful".

Evidently, on-campus students seemed more readily to translate what had been acquired from the course to school practice. Northern students had yet to reach this level of integration. They seemed to be preoccupied with the joy of having the opportunity to engage in advanced study. Distance education students, likewise, appreciated the chance to be exposed to new information, yet they were vague in addressing how this new information would be useful to them professionally.

When it comes to the system of 'performance appraisal', on-campus students indicated, "I enjoyed the oral exam. It seemed more realistic to my administrative work." Northern students felt "the grading was fair and helpful but my mark was only good not excellent". From the distance education group, we received comments like, "the course was a little threatening because of a new type of evaluation, but the comprehensiveness of the assessment criteria relaxed me."

From these comments, it would seem that most students expected to do well. Some might be expected to do better than the grades they received. Students on campus seemed more capable of relating performance assessment to their worlds of work, whereas northern and distance education students were more focused upon personal well-being under the given performance appraisal system.

In terms of the 'pace' of curriculum coverage, on-campus students felt that "the pace of the course was good and the right amount of assignments were given". To the northern students, the course "was well paced but still challenging". To the distance education students, two contrasting views, reflecting two different methodologies of instruction, were expressed: "the course needed more time for discussion - one on one" and "I liked the video tapes because I could rewind if I did not understand. (In this way) I could review it again quite easily."

These reactions are not surprising, given that on-campus and distance education students had a regular and well-spaced meeting schedule to discuss course content. Northern students, on the other hand, faced the pressure of completing the full course in four weekends.
Scrutiny of comments regarding students’ assessment on ‘instructional approach’, on-campus students remarked, “the approach was well thought out and it provided an easy transition from classroom to school”. Northern students found that, “the heavy content of the course made comprehensive discussion on every arising issue difficult”. Distance education felt, “there needs to be more discussion taking place with the video tapes and there is a problem with teleconferencing”.

Clear differences existed between students on campus versus those receiving the course in other delivery modes. A key factor accounting for the variation is again the time available for discussion. Where there was insufficient time, it compounded the difficulty of students trying to grasp important issues generated by the course. Distance education students, as the last remark suggests, also encountered unexpected technical difficulties at times. The failure to reach those communities at a time when students were ready to engage in discussion must be a frustrating experience for them.

With respect to course materials used, different reactions were detected even though the same set of materials was used. The regular students found the materials “varied”, while northern and distance education students found the materials to be “condensed”, “thought-provoking” and “heavy”. Apparently, the variations in interaction opportunity associated with each mode of course delivery dictated how much the instructor could engage in in-depth discussion, and these explained the observed reactions.

Reference to the last important aspect that discriminates among three groups of students was their different reaction to the ‘grading system’. For the regular students, one comment that seemed to capture the sentiment of the group was, “I found the assignments satisfying”. The northern students observed that “the grading as a whole could use a little more written feedback”. To the distance education students, the difficulties they encountered in completing the requirement could be summarised by this remark: “I felt pressured to complete my assignments as the resources from the university did not arrive on time. Once resources are sent to you, there is no time to get more if they are not appropriate.”

Some explanation is required to clarify the comments noted above. As adult learners cherished instant and constant feedback about their performance, a long-cherished principle of andragogy (Gibb, 1960), the instructor was pressured to correct the assignments and return them to the northern students before he headed home. Time constraint was a major reason that explained why not as much written feedback was given to the students as the instructor would like in marking papers. As for the distance education students, having to depend on the university library to ship relevant information, and the turn-around time for additional resources, constituted a persistent problem when they were preparing assignments.

Major reasons for attrition

In response to the second question as to why quite a few students dropped out prior to completion of their course, some distinct patterns of responses could be detected among the three groups. For two on-campus students who failed to finish the course, the main
reasons given were highly personal and had nothing to do with the course. One suffered from poor health and could not continue. The other had family problems and this affected her ability to concentrate on her study.

From the four northern students who did not finish the course, the reasons provided were partly personal and partly related to the course. One student lamented, “the course looked excellent and I really enjoyed the instructor’s teaching style. I would sign up again once I feel my work load would permit it.” The other complained, “the situation at work changed such that no time was available to attend classes”. All cited unexpected work commitments and schedule conflict as main reasons for withdrawal from the course. Evidently, living in smaller and remote northern communities, principals and teachers were more heavily involved in school extra-curricular activities and school-related community functions. These created demands on their weekend time, and this limited personal space interfered with their studies.

From those who withdrew from the distance education, the main complaints were directed at the technology of delivering the course. There were a few times when one or two communities failed to link up with the main control office in the telephone company and the students were prevented from taking part in the teleconferencing sessions. Remarks such as, “I feel that (the instructor) would have delivered the course well if the equipment were to work”, reflect their frustration.

Other students blamed the lack of prompt resource support: “The materials that we needed were not delivered on time”. Indeed, as most of these communities were only accessible by aeroplane, poor weather could completely disrupt flight schedules and students might not receive the back-up readings or resource materials for preparing assignments.

There were still others who did not have support work groups and who did not make use of the time set aside by the instructor for consultation. When they encountered difficulties, they became discouraged very quickly.

When they were asked about how the course could be improved in future, it was interesting to note that many wrote, “have the instructor deliver the course on site”. A few suggested that the course could be delivered in summer when they could congregate in some northern town for course instruction. This indicates that many students are still unfamiliar with the distance education mode of learning, or they still prefer the traditional face-to-face instruction, a common sentiment echoed and documented in other studies (e.g. Mceney & Bozik, 1997).

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

As in most cases of innovation, the exploration and implementation of alternate modes of course delivery are normally accompanied by oversights and blunders. At times, universities encounter the dilemma of whether to continue with the new course or retain organisational inertia. Yet, in face of diverse needs and great dispersal of clientele that institutes of higher learning have to serve in order to uphold their changing mandates, maintaining inertia or non-action is not a viable choice. Instead, the utilisation of technology to provide alternative modes of course delivery emerges to become more and more a central
core function rather than a marginal activity. Bridging from traditional to innovative practices necessitates institutionalisation and legitimisation of risk-taking.

Arising from this case study is not so much a comparison of which mode of course delivery is superior. In doing so, we unfairly place all alternative approaches at a disadvantage, given that traditional on-campus course delivery has a much longer history through which mechanics of instruction can be improved and insights into the creation of an appropriate learning climate can be developed. Rather, we should use on-campus course instruction as a basis of reference to which all alternative modes of course delivery should aspire in order to ensure not just the equity of opportunity but equity of quality of learning experiences for all learners irrespective of where they are.

*Lessons for institutions*

To this end, there are valuable lessons to be learnt by both the institution and the instructor. For the institution, the findings presented here point to some areas of inadequacy. Timely delivery of course materials to students seems critical to many who depend on these to do advanced readings and to follow the progress of the course. This further implies that registration and establishment of admission deadlines in advance will be critical in preparing students either for on-site course delivery in northern communities or for distance education.

The periodic failure of teleconference linkages to some communities can be quite disheartening to some learners. While we cannot forecast weather to ensure minimum disruption, it is possible for the institution to test-trial the connection to ensure that technical complexity should not become an obstacle to instructor-student interaction. If disruption occurs, make-up sessions should be arranged. Further, students’ concern for “inadequacy of discussion time” to cover all critical topics in a unit could either be the result of insufficient time allocation or too many students not having the opportunities to raise and clarify issues during the teleconferences. Extension of time or regrouping of students so that fewer students would be involved in each teleconferencing session would be desirable.

Aside from the administrative steps taken to respond to technological deficiency, the potential of the technology is yet to be fully explored. For instance, the lack of library resources in each community and their dependency upon university librarians for pertinent supporting materials in preparing assignments can be partially overcome if students are trained to use Internet Websites. Individual academic problems could be discussed if students are taught to use e-mail more effectively. While technology is resource-hungry in terms of capital outlay, it can be resource-efficient in overcoming instructional problems in the context of maintaining or expanding services while facing spending cuts. The true value of technology, as Novak (1998) stated lies in how it enables educators to deliver a more relevant program which focuses on the needs of the learners.

Of all the critical factors affecting the quality of course delivery revealed by the present data, close human contact cannot be replaced. Students from weekend course delivery clearly expressed their willingness to sacrifice everything for having the oppor-
tunity to interact with the instructor personally. Distance education students, likewise, continued to yearn for face-to-face interaction despite the fact that they had all kinds of substitutes. Technology, such as the use of video-conferencing, should, once again, be called upon to fill in this missing link. While it is perhaps too expensive to be the format for regular class instruction, it should be scheduled to bring back some of the loss of two-way human interaction.

Lessons for individual instructors

From the data presented here it seems obvious that the instructor does play a key role in determining the success and failure of a course irrespective of which mode of delivery demanded by the institution. Aside from the need to understand the psychology of adult learners in their acquisition of new knowledge and skills, the instructor should be mindful of the nature of the delivery patterns that might affect the learning outcomes. In this context, the instructor should provide greater understanding and support to students who are studying either under great pressure or in isolation. To achieve greater understanding and support does not mean that course expectations should be lowered nor course content diluted for off-campus students. To do so would be professionally and ethically unacceptable. Rather, the instructor should assume a multiplicity of roles – organiser, facilitator, supporter, confidence builder, counselor, etc – more so than he or she is expected to play in a regular class (e.g. Care, 1996).

Schoenfelder (1997) suggests that, while the instructor should take initiatives in structuring the course, some input from students taking the course by distance education would make it possible for the two parties to reach greater understanding as to how best the course should be organised. This would in some way affect the pace of course progression and the type of instructional approach adopted. In realistic terms, the instructor might not be able to slow down the rate of course progression, but it seems important for him or her to make an extra effort and show initiative in reaching out to individual students and maximally utilise the telephone for private consultation purposes.

When it comes to the choice of course materials, it would seem useful to integrate theoretical components of the course with students’ working experiences. In doing so, the utility of the course from learners’ perspectives would be increased.

Given the higher attrition rates experienced by students taking the condensed weekend course or receiving distance education, it seems critical for the instructor to organise support work groups in each community so that students can help each other in time of need. As adult learners are more inclined to experience anxiety and frustration when they study alone (Wagner, 1995), the formation of support groups will reduce a students’ propensity to drop out when they confront difficulties.

CONCLUSION

With the slow but steady changes in the nature of clientele that institutes of higher education are serving, the entire program and course delivery patterns are under review. As the small sample of this study reflects, there is much that universities and their faculty
members have to acquire amidst radical technological transformation. Risk-taking should be the spirit that governs new undertakings. Without this, it is easy for institutions and individual to succumb to the natural inclination of inertia, and over time they will be unable to rise to the challenges as they emerge.

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