OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATION

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Abstract: The decision to develop a program of open and distance learning is often taken at an educational organization as a result of "pressure" felt in the market or as a result of cost estimates showing that this form of education has a lower cost than traditional ones. This reality is at odds with the recommendations of experts, which suggest completing an evaluation process before the development of such a program. The article presents the steps in this process of assessment, current trends in adoption of open and distance learning through Internet use and the main areas involved in the development of this forms of education in the academic program.

Keywords: open learning, distance learning, educational policy, organizational decision, on-line education.

Open distance learning as a modality of action for educational organizations

Frequently, when it comes to distance learning program, the first impulse of educational managers is "to determine which courses will be converted to video, audio, or digital formats" (Watkins, 2000). Paradoxically, it rarely the case to determine the actual need of distance education: "The existence of educational needs that can be satisfied by specific methods of distance education does not automatically mean that distance learning is the best way to meet them" (Rumble, 1986).

Before the educational organization will decide whether or not to invest resources in a distance learning program, it is required a rigorous assessment of the needs underlying this decision and its possible consequences. Lack of or insufficient analysis of the possible consequences of the use of strategic planning in education often have unfortunate consequences, because if the impact of the open distance learning program development is little known, the organization may undergo several types of damage.

There are many models for conducting an assessment of needs by educational organizations (preliminary to the development of an open distance learning program); among the most cited models are those made by Robinson and Robinson (1995), Mager and Pipe (1997) and Kaufman (1992). Each of these models can be effective and provide technologies of assessment currently missing from the decisional process, at least in the local educational environment. Roger Kaufman's model is more rigorous, bringing together strategic planning, tactical and operational decisions, evaluation processes, focusing on organizational and societal value added. This type of assessment can be of great advantage when developing ODL programs and to justify difficult decisions. Kauffman states that three aspects should be addressed (all critical to the success of the needs assessment):

1) The first step in a needs assessment is to distinguish between goals and means, starting from the assumption that "learning is a mean, not a goal". Distance learning is only a means (among others possible) that can be used to achieve educational outcomes. Attention should focus here primarily on the aims defined by the educational organization (through own educational policy documents), before deciding that distance learning is an effective tool to achieve goals and to allocate resources for achievement.

2) There are three levels of results - all results of educational organizations can be classified into one of three categories, depending on the client / beneficiary (Kaufman, 1992):

- The first level is the one of "mega-results" , which refers to the aims of education . For the results that fall into this category, the primary "client" and the beneficiary is the society. Organizations in any industry (private, public, and non-profit oriented towards production, information management etc.) contribute in a positive or negative way in relation to society, according to the produced finalities.

- The second level is the one of "macro-results" at which different products are generated. "Macro" results are those claimed and received by specific customers / beneficiaries of educational organization;

- The third level of results is the one of "micro-results" which are internal to the organization. Individuals and groups within an educational organization complete a set of tasks and their products are used by other individuals or groups.

3) In deciding on the development of an ODL program we must not forget that the "need" is a noun, not a verb: in the context of needs assesment, this distinction is vital. By chosing to realistically refer to the needs and gaps identified in the organizational outcomes, the trap of premature alluring selection of solutions can be avoided (such as the immediate adoption of distance education)

Adopting an ODL program – a process of organizational decision

On the adoption of open and distance education, Ryan Watkins (2000, 2-3) described the following algorithm, which can be used by any organization in the field of education:

- Step one: Identify and align mission (s) of the educational organization. Step one is a difficult task in most organizations because different subunits thereof (eg. a university departments) may have defined their own missions, not always consistent to each other. The fundamental question that arises here is "How distance learning program facilitates the organization's mission?" Where the achievement of a distance learning program does not contribute to the overall mission, then the mission should be reviewed before any solutions of ODL type will be implemented. Technological solutions unrelated to the mission can lead to poor achievement and / or damage to the organizations. The implementation of a distance learning program should contribute to achieving the vision of the organization. Beyond aligning missions, educational managers should use competitive environment analysis and market analysis to validate the direction of the organization (Willis, 1994).

-Step two: identifying the needs. Needs can be defined in this context as discrepancies between current results and the results needed to achieve the organization's mission, program objectives and individual goals . The identification of needs requires both information obtained in the first step and collected information on actual performance and results of the organization. Needs assessment usually refers to the opinion data (through interviews, questionnaires, or other methods).

- Step three: prioritization and selection of needs in order to meet them. This process of prioritization and selection is critical to the success of any organization. How data are collected and analyzed will have two effects on the quality of needs assessment: (a) an extended period of data collection can cancel timeliness of assessment, and (b) if there are insufficient data, the assessment results can be invalidated.

- Step four: identifying requirements and alternative solutions. Before identification of alternatives, it is useful to define the requirements for settlement. These requirements will establish the criteria by which each alternative will be judged. Formulating specific requirements as to facilitate the listing of alternatives and selection of the "best" solution, which should include the requirements of time, cost, resources available and needed results. It is important to emphasize in this context that a distance learning program is just one of a possible solution for most performance problems encountered in educational organizations.

- Step five: Selecting the solution. Based on the analysis undertaken in steps three and four (the foundation of the first two steps) now is the time for decision. Deciding a unique solution may or may not be advisable. For many issues of educational organizations performance, a combination of good yield solutions usually produces the best results. Priori statements (like "we need a distance learning program" when a performance problem occurs in an educational organization) must not lead to a decision, but rather to be a part of a dynamic process. Needs assessment provides essential information to identify the right solution for the organization. Therefore, systematically implementing an algorithm of needs assessment, we will be able to proof the validity, usefulness, and confidence in the decision.

The evaluation process described above should be covered by any educational organization to develop an ODL program type as it has several distinct advantages:
- The process is guided by the mission of the organization;
- Aligning the mission will drive everything the organization does.
- Decisions are based on achieving measurable results;
- Rigor of the process can be adjusted to different contexts and constraints - Willis (1994) recommends that " the process should avoid becoming bogged down in detail";
- Assessment information will establish performance criteria and evaluation criteria;

These are some major advantages, especially in the context of distance education being adopted too early. Solutions of ODL can be successfully justified when needs assessment is complete. Long term availability and low cost of a distance learning program makes them competitive for achieving most of the objectives of educational organizations.

A thorough needs assessment process can provide certainty that a distance education program will meet these goals and therefore the organization's mission.

Trends in adopting open and distance learning
On the development of ODL in Western countries, Zane Berge (2010) sums up the works which deal with various existing trends in current organizations in the adoption of this type of educational programs :
- Technology and Society. The same technology that powers the global economy changes and stimulates the growth of what is called learning organization, fueling the need for continuing education for both organizations and individuals. Not surprisingly, this trend also involves transforming the way we deliver training in the workplace, using learning technologies and distance learning . Distance training can improve the quality of learning and performance of employees in an organization in an effective way (with a lower cost as compared to traditional methods), and organizations that take advantage of these opportunities will acquire a competitive edge in the market.

The power of adopting distance training solutions is an obvious one, by relating it to the traditional approach of training. The traditional approach involves the presence in the same physical space of the trainer and the trainees. The use of E-learning and the adoption of other adult learning ways produces a design and development of an active and authentic learning environment in organizational context, which often focuses on collaboration and teamwork.

- *ODL – a needed change.* In the current economic conditions, for a company to remain viable and profitable, the market does no longer allow the pursuit of common practices ("business as usual") on human resource management. Although ODL exists for decades, has not yet reached the critical point where the change of culture, economic conditions and the theoretical position would decisively influence a major change in education and training. In today's economic climate partial improvements are often insufficient, and significant changes within an organization ultimately occur when the organization is already in crisis.

By adopting ODL it is possible to significantly improve the way of training and education that becomes centered on the beneficiary and is generally characterized by collaboration and a constructivist approach. To make this possible it is necessary to improve employee skills and their performance on an order of magnitude beyond what can be achieved through traditional teaching methods. Thus, it is produced a change in the workplace that requires changes in the expectations, roles, responsibilities of all actors involved: instructors, students, managers, for organizations to develop their learning ability. Technology is a catalyst for change in society, economics, marketing and a reason to change the formation by using ODL.

Open and Distance Learning and The World Wide Web Learning comes from the practice of "independent learning" in which students who have not had access to a campus, studied using materials (eg, texts, summaries, etc.) sent to them by the university. Norma organization of independent learning was given by the fact that students do not comply with the time limits of a standard university or do not have a group of colleagues known to interact with. A considerable amount of programs based on independent learning was developed in the USA. However, other quality standards are required for e-Learning in emerging forms of individual tutoring based on the World Wide Web ("Internet").

Certain attributes of the World Wide Web have fueled the explosion of learning opportunities (Frydenberg, 2002): the ability to allow extensive sharing media (images, complex diagrams, video, audio); interactive communications and 'friendly' users; a multitude of ways that can be used in education (such as e-mail, virtual bulletin boards and chat rooms simultaneously); applications that enable "virtual classroom" (forms of Web communication - video and audio teleconferencing).

In the current social situation, most people will have to continue active / acquire a university level of understanding and will seek to improve their knowledge throughout life. This learning combined with involvement in the family, community and life, will cover an increasingly period of the individual's life.

Although its current development is exponential, the quality criteria for e-Learning are not generally well defined. There are very few reports on the effectiveness of e-Learning developed from the perspective of the learner. However, e -learning programs are most

commonly offered by higher education institutions in a way that virtually guarantees "full cost recovery" for those who would follow. However, students certainly applie market tests for these costs - especially the quality and value of service. Although higher education institutions (including Romanian) pay attention to provide students independent evaluation of programs, these evaluations are not always reliable. More research must be done to fully explore consumer standards for e -Learning and to integrate these standards with traditional academic concerns . Given the lack of consumer information, on the Internet are available - with few exceptions - the views of academic institutions , and rarely those of " consumer education" .

Areas involved in the development of an ODL in the academic environment

A number of areas are described repeatedly in the consulted field literature as a "core" of an ODL program (Frydenberg, 2002):

1. Institutional commitment –the development of an ODL program requires the presence of an institutional commitment to education and providing learning using technology. There is considerable variation in the understanding of what constitutes such an undertaking. It covers issues such as financial commitment, articulation with other policies, technical support, legal compliance, etc. Although the American Council on Education (1996) adds teachers and development staff and a research commitment to the activities on their list of requirements related to "organizational commitment", it does not specify that research must be directly related to distance education.

2. Technology - technological infrastructure needed to deliver an e-Learning program is often described as a separate domain as support materials (text , video, audio) quality as a component of the IDD program . The form of distance education, the role of technology is to promote interaction between students and between students and teachers. This interactivity is generally not defined by documents governing education and - in many cases - interaction with a computer in a complex, branched guiding learning through the process "step-by-step" is described as "interactive". American standards define interactivity by the presence of a human guide (faculty member or guardian) who leads the group of students to a learning objective (Frydenberg , 2002). In most cases, the standards under "technology" do not include criteria related to the accessibility to materials and interactivity and deeper technical issues (such as system maintenance, updates, redundancy, network access etc.).

3. Services for students. A third aspect of quality standards do not cover either teaching or learning - it is centered on the services providedfor students. This area includes services needed before the "entry " of the students in a virtual class, the support during the learning experience and the relationship between students and the higher education institution or program after a course has been completed. Prospective students need to know, first, that there is a learning possibility and to obtain accurate information about it. For an organization-supplier, the decision to create an e- learning program should be based, in part, on an assessment of needs of learning and identifying an identifiable group of potential students. In this context, there is a difficult distinction to draw between marketing efforts and providing timely information to prospective students, and these documents and processes should be included in the evaluation of the ODL type of program .

Student counseling services are commonly referred to as necessary to maintain a high quality of e-Learning programs. There are here many systems, such as toll-free numbers, databases and software for students management (and contact management), counseling type "chat room" etc.. In addition, technical training through a course like "How to use our facilities virtual" is offered at most universities. One aspect of a quality educational program is access to support materials, which means - usually - access to a electronically available library.

4. Design and development of training courses - There are numerous standards for designing and developing e -learning programs. A report from Pennsylvania State University entitled An emerging set of guidelines for the design and development of distance education (1998) presents the following five aspects of design: 1) learning objectives and presentation of content ; 2) interactions ; 3) evaluation and measurement ; 4) the training and tools available , and 5) support services for students. In the academia, usually the same person performs the training and conceives the materials design . A faculty member does practically everything : determines the objectives of the course, sets what the students have to study , when and how they should study , and when and how to conduct the assessment . However, in e -Learning it is crucial to separate the two roles as distinct skills required to perform at high level in these two complementary situations . Quality benchmarks for the development of instructional design are different from those needed to run the process to facilitate learning . In addition, we are just beginning to explore ways in which the design of training should vary depending on the discipline or type of objectives or learning outcomes.

5. Learning and teachers - In addition to the benchmark for quality training in the face-to-face system (such as the depth of knowledge of the instructor, the style of presentation and organizational skills, encouraging dialogue attitudes towards the student, feedback and guidance etc.), one of the fundamental problems of education in ODL is given by the fact that the learning made by the student occurs mostly independently to the immediate influence of the teacher. Unless the design of electronic training course emphasizes openly that students are assessed on the basis of group tasks, students perceive themselves most likely only as interacting in a relationship student / tutor. It is obvious that this orientation contrasts with traditional academic way of developing courses carried out with hundreds students at a time.

Before teaching, an instructor must feel comfortable with the use of means which provides the class and - hence – he may need training and guidance. During the e-Learning program, technical staff should be available to assist instructors in solving technological problems.

6. Delivering - Some standards in the field of e-learning include delivery as a separate domain. Delivery of ODL programs takes place in the "institutional context," taking into account various aspects such as coordination, supervision, and articulation with other educational programs. A good program delivery depends on two aspects: 1) the definition of policies, procedures, responsibilities; and 2) communication, including sound and impartial information. Ideally, program delivery and administration of the ODL program must be transparent to the learner in all aspects, as is the existence of a student in a university campus.

7. Financial aspects - The impetuous desire for the development of courses and e-Learning programs do not always take into account the current practices of ongoing education regarding financial matters. There are numerous examples of wrong assumptions about the

functioning of ODL programs in this regard, for example, the naive assumption that e-learning platforms can be protected permanently from the point of view of copyright or incurring the cost of teacher salary levels could be performed regular tuition to hundreds of students, together with a significant savings of resources. None of these assumptions proved to be true in practice.

As in other types of educational programs , there are the costs of e -Learning . Universities have undertaken the production of comprehensive programs from scratch, often found that ongoing expenses are inversely proportional to the amount of courses that will be produced. An interesting benefit of this practice is the early development of "learning objects" , which involves the creation of " molecules " of learning that can be developed once and then shared and / or obtained with license by others. There are now a number of large-scale experiments based on this concept (see , eg http://www.wiadlcolab.org, http://www.adlnet.org , and http://www. imsproject.org) . Licensing content, either as objects or complete or partial courses generally are based on the business model where content owner receives a fee for each student.

8. Legal compliance - Regulations on e-Learning is growing. The two primary sources of U.S. regulators are regional accreditation agencies that have a long history in the United States, and since 1990 there is an avaluation of the American Federation of Persons with Disabilities, with considerable discussion in the community about e-learning on how to ensure certain standards. From this point of view, e-learning promises much, especially for students with mental or physical disabilities.
Legal compliance also relates to intellectual property. Intellectual property issues are hotly debated in any education system that includes ODL programs.

9. Evaluation - The evaluation program is frequently mentioned as a separate documentation describing the requirements of ODL. Here are two specific issues:
- Assessment of learning outcomes of students as part of the design, related to the specific objectives of the course;
- ODL program evaluation, which is a meta-activity that includes all aspects of e-learning experience

On-line platforms for the development of ODL

Currently, the number of ODL programs are in exponential growth, including both colleges and university programs and training or retraining of adult training in companies etc.

Therefore, the number of sites for this type of education is steadily increasing both in terms of sites presenting educational programs and the promotion of the practice of this type of education. Regarding the latter category, we compiled a ranking ad-hoc on-line platforms for the development of ODL, which I will illustrate with web sites included in the reference list. Of course, it can not be an exhaustive classification, but the fact that a "census" of these websites would be almost impossible to achieve.

Based on the criterion of addressability to the providers of ODL programs, we could define the following categories of online platforms for the development of ODL:
a) resource centers for academic users in the same space:
(http://depd.wisc.edu/html/reports3.htm - University of Wisconsin-Madison, Professional development resources in distance education and e-learning sau

http://www.wcet.info/2.0/index.php?q=Publications - WCET (Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications);

b) Resource centres for ODL program providers at national or sectorial level: http://www.educause.edu/resources - EDUCAUSE Resource Center sau

http://www.nces.ed.gov/ - National Center for Education Statistics;

c) platforms of national organizations of providers of ODL programs, such as: http://www.usdla.org/-United States Distance Learning Association;

http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/Australian Flexible Learning Framework;

http://www.cnie-rcie.ca/ - The Canadian Network for Innovation in Education sau http://www.saide.org.za/ - South African Institute for Distance Education)

c) sites of international organization including providers of OODL programs of certain educational areas: http://www.elene-tt.net/project.htm - European collaboration for improving Teacher Training; sau http://www.elleu.org/ - E-learning for European languages and literatures.

d) informal structures of peer-review type of the ODL programs:

http://www.eclo.org/index.html - European Consortium for Learning Organizations; http://www.obhe.ac.uk/home - The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education sau http://www.detc.org/ - Distance Education and Training Council.

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