

Implementing continuing education programmes: some collaborative considerations

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Introduction

The need for forging links between continuing education agencies, on the one hand, and continuing education agencies and other institutions on the other, has become greater over the years. The emergence of new forms of learning, the changing concepts of academic space and time, and the growth of new media and methodologies all seem to create demands for new kinds of organisation to manage the knowledge enhancement and skills transfer efforts. Where maximally utilised, collaborative efforts can lead to higher productivity. The growing phenomenon of the borderless world in education, and the ever-widening clientele base, for example in distance education, are leading to various collaborative efforts. A growing demand for utilising personnel and resources beyond organisational walls is seen. While organisations may come together to collaborate, the dynamics involved also have implications for creating changes in organisational outlook, with reviews of practices sometimes emerging as a result. In a continuing education environment that is becoming more competitive daily, determining appropriate resource sharing modalities becomes necessary. This discourse is pitched within the thematic arena of changing organisations, with plans to highlight aspects of diversity, an obvious feature of most collaborative ventures.

Against this background, this paper discusses modalities for promoting collaboration between continuing education organisations and other institutions. It examines the gains and consequences of collaboration. It discusses some collaborative models and the implications for changing organisations in continuing education. The paper also examines some theoretical issues surrounding the collaboration discourse. Finally, problems that beset collaborative efforts are discussed and suggestions given on how to avoid them.

The Centre for Continuing Education (CCE) of the University of Botswana, hitherto referred to in this paper by its acronym, CCE, is occasionally used in the paper to provide an experiential context for some of the discussions. The CCE has three programming units, the Distance Education Unit (DEU), the Public Education Unit (PEU), and the Extra-Mural Unit. Respectively, the units focus on distance education provisions, public awareness creation and the provision of part-time credit and non-credit programmes.

Collaboration in continuing education

Various writers, including Akinplelu (1988; 2002) and Apps (1991) have explained the concept of continuing education. From their submissions, the following are the characteristics observed of the concept and phenomenon:

- they are mostly adult education programmes
- programmes are relatively organised but may have dimensions of flexibility
- a variety of agencies including private industry, government, universities and colleges, non-governmental organisations, and professional associations are involved

- needs of a wide variety of clientele are met
- usually, clients have been known to have completed initial education
- certificates of attendance are usually awarded at the end of a variety of programmes, although clients receive formal qualifications in many of the programmes
- clientele of most programmes participate on a voluntary basis

Recent developments in education, especially continuing and higher education have shown the need to veer away from attaching too much importance to space, time, content and methods of provisions. This is against the backdrop of the human tendency to be mobile, and society's flexibility and propensity to desire change. A growing shift from the medium of print to the electronic medium is observed, even as educational boundaries continually experience collapse (Spender, 1996). A growing technological advancement is becoming more observable. Earlier calls for deschooling society (Illich, 1970; Reimer, 1971) seem to be re-emerging in other forms. Research that fuels knowledge growth is continually expected to have corporate and community input, rather than being a mere reflection of ivory towerism. Within the context of these developments, continuing education is expected to respond to the challenges, even as it responds by breaking down its own institutional walls in its adoption of new phenomena. One such phenomenon is collaboration, a concept not totally strange to continuing education, but which may nevertheless have new levels of meaning and interpretation.

Continuing education has in its nature some collaborative tendencies. First is the multi disciplinary nature of its activities, and the wide range of subjects involved. Second is the nature of its clientele who come with a variety of backgrounds and experiences. A third is the growing use of technology in carrying out continuing education activities, thus ensuring that new providers need to understand new ways of doing things. A fourth is the growing recognition that resources for implementing continuing education programmes are being affected by economic forces. Collaboration by continuing education agencies thus appears to be a major tool for addressing these concerns.

Collaboration has been described as the pooling together of resources and efforts through strategies, which promote efficiency and meet institutional goals (Adekanmbi, Mphinyane and Kamau, 1996). Fergus (1991) sees it as being focused on 'partnership rather than domination'. It ensures a fair distribution of resources and also reduces compartmentalisation. It creates a strong awareness of other organisations' inner working systems. Used at national, regional and international levels, its models and variants include *direct intervention*, *consultancy*, *shared resources*, *shared market*, and the *associational* models, among others. In the process of collaboration, needs and programmes are identified, while planning and determination of areas of collaboration are done.

Various terminologies and phrases have been used to describe collaboration. These include *partnership building*, *forging links*, *co-operating*, *working together* and a host of others. A conceptual analysis of these terms reveals some subtle differences. However, a generic interpretation of the term, which sees it as encompassing those attempts at reaching commonly beneficial goals between continuing education agencies and their partners is adopted in this paper. It is quite informing to note that in an introductory piece on the same subject, Elliot (2001) has tautologically used the phrase 'collaborative partnerships' to describe it.

In their submission, Abramson, Bird and Stennet (1996) have highlighted the trends in collaboration within the context of further and higher education in the United Kingdom. The following are notable:

- the emergence of academic franchising, where 'the whole or part of a course developed and offered by an institution is delivered by another...'
- 'the development and delivery of joint courses, articulation agreements and traditional validations of complete higher education programmes owned entirely by further education institutions...'
- partnerships including equal set-ups where concepts such as 'strategic planning', 'research', staff development and 'curricular merger' become the bases of collaborative agreements
- within institutional mergers, desires by some to retain their institutional autonomy
- observable trends in partnership where a bottom-up approach is observed without strict government guidance through 'any national policy'

Abramson (1996) writing on the UK experience notes the following as gains in the context of the collaboration between further education institutions and higher education institutions:

- direct and indirect income generation
- widening of participation in further and higher education
- promotion of regional status and influence for participating institutions
- serving of community needs, especially for further education institutions
- local delivery of teaching and learning.

The following problems have fuelled collaboration drives in continuing education:

- Production and distribution delays
- Lack of appropriate expertise in some areas of operation,
- Need to convert existing extra-mural programmes into distance education programmes
- Continuing inability to properly address the problem of student support
- Lack of adequate training in some technical areas of operation
- Obsolescence in knowledge
- Slow pace of material development
- Copyright issues and related problems
- Desire for more tutorial space.

We shall now examine the association, shared market, direct intervention, shared resources, and eclectic models of collaboration, proposed by this writer, and presented in Adekanmbi, Kamau and Mphinyane (1996).

Some Collaborative Models

Association model

This is a loose and useful model for networking, whose gains may take a while to come. It is an old model, which has served as a catalyst for major collaborative efforts. Its thrust is the voluntary coming together of various organisations to form associations, based on needs. In the field of distance education, examples abound: Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA), the National Association of Distance Education Organisations of South Africa (NADEOSA) and the West African Distance Education Association (WADEA). While some associations have grown to have a strong functional and operational status, others have remained slightly basic in their operations. The main advantage is members' reliance on trust, contributions, decisions taken at meetings, and the commonality of operations. A seeming lack, in many cases, of extreme officialdom tends to provide an atmosphere for friendliness and success.

Shared market model

This model has a mostly economic goal, and sometimes may result from a desire to address proximity problems. Many continuing education organisations may be interested in the same market for students while having various levels of strength. An organisation may have the students and not the modules of instruction, which would be used. Contractual agreements are entered into and areas of operation identified. The problems here include the possible loss of clients to the partner. The Zimbabwe Open University and the CCE are engaged in a kind of shared market situation in the Diploma in Youth in Development programme. The CCE's working agreement with University of South Africa (UNISA) for use of its course materials in distance education is another example.

Direct intervention model

Here, it is common to have an institutional provider of continuing education just about to introduce a programme, asking a consultant to assist. A feasibility study may be done, and structures later put in place for programme commencement. The needs of the client are usually extensive, including staff recruitment and training related considerations. The main problem is that the needy institution usually has little or no expertise in the area. It is also willing to pay the price for a *stranger's* total intervention. Possible problems here are a wholesale transfer of practices from organisation A to B, and the very probable high cost of operations. Although this is called collaboration, it may not necessarily be collaborative. Perhaps Elliot's (Elliot, 2001) hinting at what can be regarded as the 'rhetoric' of collaboration is germane here. However, aspects of the operations will obviously require a high degree of consultation with the benefiting organisation. It is safe to say that various organisations want to have their own input into practices.

Shared resources model

Here, institutions with common problems and practices come together to share resources, which may include space, expertise, tutors and technology. As in the shared market model, it is not uncommon for one organisation to swallow the other in the course of collaboration. Unlike it, financial considerations are not major. The CCE and the Botswana Government are actively involved in collaborative ventures. Government usually has the students or clients, while the CCE has the resources to provide education and training. This is apart from the university structures that allow for effective work. Government has been seen to make a lot of resources available, which eventually benefit other programmes at the Centre.

Eclectic model

This presupposes the merger of variants of each model. It is a careful combination of the elements of the models just discussed, based on need and situation. The eclectic model has the best chance of ensuring success.

Other issues in models

Four clusters of models discussed by Woodrow and Thomas in the book they jointly edited with Jocey Quinn, *Collaboration to widen participation in higher education* (Thomas, Cooper and Quinn, 2002) also show some of the elements highlighted above. However, most collaborative models are shaped by the context, practices and collaborators' intent. Some models easily indicate their experiential and environmental connotations. For example, the models identified by Woodrow and Thomas (2002), the Los Angeles 'Pyramid' with its *transfer feature*, the *Utrecht 'Bridge'* with its *longitudinal feature*; the *Cork 'Spider'*, with its *process dimension*, and the *Melbourne 'Marriage'* with its *seamless feature* all have contextual origins. Each is based on some specific practices in the USA, the Netherlands, Ireland, and Australia, in that order.

Reflections on practices

During this writer's years in the field of continuing education, and especially at the CCE, the following observations have been made in respect of practices. They are highlighted thus:

- Not all cases of collaboration have resulted from a total lack on the part of the collaborating continuing education partners.
- Some identified areas of sharing or need are more common in specific continuing education practices than others
- Many arrangements have not warranted a rigid signing of agreements
- The use of individual expertise has been arranged more on an individual contractual basis than on an institution to institution basis
- Some demands for cost sharing have actually been demands for full sponsorship

On issues related to change in organisations, the CCE experience reveals that collaboration has thrust upon it the need to effect a number of changes in its operations. Some of these changes are still evolving but they are nevertheless observable. A highlight reveals the following:

- Its three programmes from its early days are now being increased
- Its media of operation, initially print-based now hopes to adopt teleconferencing and web-based initiatives due to participating department's desires and the university's own restructuring plans
- Government involvement in collaboration has led to increases in programmes and students
- New collaborative initiatives with the University of South Africa is leading to staff recruitment with new titles for such staff
- Colleges hitherto established for conventional purposes are now actively involved in continuing education programmes
- Public education programmes are expected to increase the participation of members of the community in their advisory capacity
- An international collaborative venture is leading to the starting of a similar programme within the CCE
- Demand for storage space and technical staff to manage programmes is increasing
- A demand for staff training is growing in teleconferencing , and web-based educational initiatives.

While these changes are notable, other considerations are now examined such as the problems of collaboration and ways of addressing them.

Other considerations

Moran and Mugridge (1993) and King (1996) have identified a variety of problems, which dog collaboration. Some of them include:

- Lack of mission clarity of organisations
- Absence of a clear funding policy
- Lack of effective leadership
- Institutionalisation of activities
- Lack of community support
- Lack of proper facilitation
- Difficulties arising from cultural differences
- Curriculum inflexibility
- Managerial difficulties

Other problems include lack of adequate knowledge of institutional expertise; diversity of institutional backgrounds; and constraints arising from extreme reliance on donor funding.

The following suggestions should help the collaboration efforts of most organisations to be successful. Continuing education providers would need to:

- Identify the activities, operational methods, clientele needs, of collaborators
- Develop internal organisational initiatives and promote institutional capacities
- Build trust relationships and develop a common culture in collaborative efforts
- Use an eclectic approach in adopting models
- Establish inventories of programmes, expertise and facilities in the continuing education institutions
- Utilise local networks while establishing links
- Focus on areas of strengths and weakness when deciding on issues for collaboration.

Conclusion

Abramson (1996) has observed that the 'rationale for partnership cannot be static' (p.7). The ultimate goal in collaboration is an integration of ideas and practices along mutually beneficial lines. In spite of its formal elements, the air of informality must pervade collaborative undertakings. Learner satisfaction, participant involvement and organisational change are also of great importance. Adopted collaboration models need to reflect the eclectic dimensions of interpretation based on needs, learner and organisational preferences, institutional pursuits, and the contexts of work and of study.

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