

## **The Successes and Challenges of Blended Learning at UWIDEC: ICT innovations widening access to higher education<sup>1</sup>**

Dianne Thurab-Nkhosi, Editor,  
University of the West Indies, Distance Education Centre,  
St Augustine, Trinidad. E-mail [dthurab@dec.uwi.edu](mailto:dthurab@dec.uwi.edu)  
Tel: 868-645-2995

### **BACKGROUND**

The Distance Education Centre (UWIDEC) was established in 1996 to expand the university's initiatives in distance education. Currently, The UWIDEC offers a full undergraduate degree in business management, a certificate in Gender and Development Studies and a certificate in e-governance at its thirty-one (31) centres located throughout the English-speaking Caribbean. Traditionally, these programmes have been offered using a combination of synchronous (real time) and asynchronous (delayed time) interaction. The synchronous interaction has been facilitated through the audioconferencing system of the UWIDEC and face-to-face tutorials, while print materials and some computer-based activities and resources comprise the asynchronous elements.

One of the goals of the institution has been to make greater use of asynchronous technologies to widen access to education in the region. In 2004, a formal decision was taken for UWIDEC to adopt a blended approach to delivery, which would facilitate more efficient use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the delivery of teaching and learning. This case study outlines the "blended learning approach" adopted by UWIDEC and the innovations adopted to incorporate ICTs in the delivery mix of UWIDEC, focusing on the challenges faced and the success achieved.

### **BLENDED LEARNING IN THE UWIDEC CONTEXT**

While UWIDEC has traditionally offered its programmes using a mix of print, audioconferencing and face-to-face tutorials, not much use has been made of asynchronous, computer-based technologies to expand access to education. With increasing student numbers over a wider geographical spread, and greater demands being placed on the audio-conferencing network, it was decided to move toward more asynchronous delivery. This incorporation of more asynchronous delivery using computer-based technologies into the mix is considered a move toward "blended learning". To initiate this move to blended learning, the UWIDEC established a blended learning project, headed by the curriculum specialist/campus coordinator, St. Augustine.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is an abridged version of a paper presented at the Pan Commonwealth Forum on Open and Distance Learning, October 30 to November 03, 2006 by the same author.

The project was intended to prepare a set of pilot courses incorporating more asynchronous, computer-based technologies in time for delivery in the 2005/2006 academic year.

## **THE BLENDED-LEARNING PROJECT**

Thirteen courses were selected as pilot courses based on the willingness and skills of lecturers/course developers at the Mona, Cave Hill and St. Augustine campuses of the UWI. The course developers were content specialists for the respective courses and each worked with a course development team comprising a curriculum specialist, editor, web designer/ multi-media specialist and technician.

Based on the time frame within which the pilots were to be ready for delivery, a minimal blended learning package was decided on which included:

- Printed resources that UWIDEC traditionally provided
- A website comprising course outline, course administration details, e-mail, discussion forums, links to resources
- A CD-ROM comprising lectures (PowerPoint slides with audio and/or video), for 10 of the 13 pilot courses.

### **Changes to the Course Development Process: Incorporating CDs and Online Elements**

Websites for the courses, as well as CD-ROMS, were not part of UWIDEC's original course design so these areas were innovations for the UWIDEC course development teams. A decision was taken to utilize an open source Learning Management System (LMS) called MOODLE, for the development of the course websites, while production of the multi-media CDs were sponsored by a grant from the Organization of American States (OAS). These two innovations to the course package, however, brought with them changes to specific processes and operations, in particular, the course development and course delivery processes, which were condensed and required existing staff members to multi-task. The seemingly condensed version of the multi-media process adopted by UWIDEC largely arose due to time constraints brought on by the need to meet grant conditions for the CDs. The issue of time constraints was one among a number of issues, which posed challenges to the successful incorporation of the CD and online elements of the blended learning project.

#### *Successes and Challenges*

In 2005 CDs were completed for 10 pilot courses, distributed to students and reviewed. Following is the general comment made by the reviewer:

Generally, the CD presentations are attractive and focused, and can be effectively used in supporting other course teaching/learning modalities. Most of the attributes assessed were rated either Acceptable, Good or Excellent with few instances of weak ratings. .. On a positive note, the CDs tended to target specific topics or situations and either

provided a context in which the course could be understood, or addressed an issue that may be challenging to students. The use of colour and aspects of the graphics were very well done. <sup>2</sup>

In September 2005, 9 online course websites were developed and launched for students. While maintaining the commitment of academics has been a difficult undertaking, the vision of a more flexible learning package for students, has motivated staff to continue on the project. In January 2006, six online sites were added.

While there has been some success with regard to the development of online courses and CDs, it is to be noted that there were challenges. Video and online inputs are new to the UWIDEC and as a result, the staff required for this activity and the hardware and software were not catered for early on. The addition of only 1 staff member to each team required existing staff to function in multiple roles. There is also dependence on existing academic staff at the university to provide the core content and creative input. These members of staff were not trained in multi-media production, nor were they accustomed to creating visual productions or online activities for teaching and learning purposes. Most were full-time teaching staff engaged in face-to-face teaching and responsible for large classes. The production of the CDs and the development of the websites were seen as add-ons to their already burdensome schedule and it was difficult, in most cases, to hold and maintain their commitment to completion of the project.

The production process was constrained by the tight deadlines within which activities had to be completed, in this case between June to September 2005.

### **Changes in Course Delivery: Moving to Asynchronous**

#### *Preparing eTutors*

While full-time staff members of the UWIDEC have been affected by the move to blended learning, the greatest impact perhaps has been on the course coordinators, tutors and students who have been accustomed to operating in a synchronous environment. In the traditional mode of delivery at UWIDEC there was little use made of online learning and CDs. Recognizing the need to prepare course coordinators, tutors and students for the move to asynchronous delivery the UWIDEC conducted a series of training and orientation sessions.

Three training workshops catering to 150 tutors from throughout the region were conducted in January 2005. Coordinators of the various UWIDEC Centres were asked to nominate from among existing tutors of the 13 pilot courses, those who demonstrated commitment and would be willing

<sup>2</sup> Edwards-Henry, A. (2006), *Evaluation Report- CD Presentations – UWI Distance Education Centre (UWIDEC)*. St Augustine: IDU. p.3

to function as etutors. A total of 92 tutors from throughout the region attended the sessions held in three locations, namely Port of Spain, to accommodate persons from Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada and Belize; Kingston, Jamaica to accommodate those from Jamaican UWIDEC sites and sites in the northern Caribbean, and at Cave Hill, Barbados to accommodate those sites from Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean, excluding Grenada. The workshops covered a range of administrative issues as well as issues related to tutoring.

### *Preparing students*

In order to prepare students for the online experience, an orientation course entitled *Improving Your Study Skills* was mounted from July 18-August 24 2005. The course was intended to provide students with the opportunity to improve their capability in using web-based or online learning, as well as their critical reading skills. A total of 834 students participated in the six-week course, which covered the following topics:

- Preparing for online learning
- Study Strategies
- Understanding the Reading Process
- Taking Notes and Writing Summaries

The first Unit of the course, preparing for online learning, included a two-hour hands-on session conducted by site technicians. The remainder of the course was delivered totally online, with the support of 40 eTutors most of whom were trained by UWIDEC.

### *Successes and Challenges*

One of the major successes of the change to asynchronous delivery has been the creation of a pool of trained eTutors. This is a much-needed resource in the region as more institutions of higher education move toward more online course offerings. Another success has been the motivation and encouragement for students to actually use computers for more than word processing. As the blended learning project progressed, a fair number of students logged in and accessed the courses. The lowest number of students logging into any course was 68% and the highest number was 99%.

While there appears to be a high percentage of students logging in to the courses, one of the challenges has been to encourage students to interact in the online environment through the discussions. Many students log in and browse the site, reading and lurking online without posting a discussion. Efforts have been made to address this by awarding grades for participation and also using the eTutors to motivate the students. One of the challenges faced however has been the lack of effective communication in some instances. Effective communication was considered a factor of technical as well as administrative issues. The introduction of blended learning using the open source LMS Moodle has made e-mail a compulsory requirement for both students and tutors. This means that theoretically at least, both students and tutors must create e-mail accounts and therefore, should have access to an electronic means of communicating.

Another challenge has been remuneration for eTutors. Within the university system there exists a clear policy on remuneration for face-to-face tutors, no such policy existed for etutors. The UWIDEC therefore had to create a system of payment.

## **LESSONS LEARNT AND IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT**

With the completion of the pilot project in April 2006, reflection on the successes and challenges highlighted the following issues, which should be considered by any institution in the developing country context and looking toward online learning as a means of increasing access to higher education:

- Adequate technological and human resource must be available. In the case of the latter, a team skilled in web-based and multi-media development and supported with the appropriate hardware and software is essential.
- Realistic production schedules with contingency plans in the event of unforeseen circumstances should be put in place
- Adequate incentives should be provided which encourage course developers to submit relevant materials on time and in-budget. And which sustains their interest throughout the process.
- Incentives for online tutors must be clearly articulated and sustainable
- Student support in the form of adequate orientations and technical support as well as encouragement to participate in the online environment must be provided in good time.

Online learning offered by a regional institution such as The UWI has the potential to create a regional and ultimately international learning community. It also has the potential for capacity building particularly in skills that are globally marketable. In order to capitalize on the possibilities however and ensure that the innovations lead to the successful attainment of goals, the organization must be prepared to respond to the needs of not only its stakeholders, but also the vibrant environment within which we are operating.