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Nuts and Bolts of an eLearning Program for Asia-Pacific Journalists

Media Training Center Report:

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Abstract

This paper discusses the delivery of training programs for working journalists in Asia and the Pacific Islands via the Internet. The first part describes the program, offered by the Konrad Adenauer Center for Journalism at the Ateneo de Manila University (CFJ) in the Philippines, and the potentials of eLearning technology in delivering internationally-competitive training courses to the region's journalists. The second part describes the process that led to the establishment of CFJ's eLearning capability. The results of an assessment of the program are presented in the third part. The last section discusses learner and teacher characteristics that facilitate success in an eLearning environment.

Beginnings

The Konrad Adenauer Center for Journalism at the Ateneo (CFJ) was jointly established in June 2000 by Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, a German political foundation, and the Ateneo de Manila University, run by the Jesuit priests in the Philippines. CFJ's mandate is to promote good journalism practices in the Asia-Pacific mainly by offering two distance learning programs: certificate courses and the Master of Arts in Journalism.

Online learning is particularly useful to working journalists. Apart from making learning a convenient activity – since learning can theoretically take place anytime, anywhere - online learning reduces the peripheral costs of further education such as interruptions in a person's life and the cultural dislocation associated with studying in a foreign country. Moreover, eLearning facilitates the involvement of journalists and teachers from across the region and beyond. As eLearning is inherently learner-centred and process-oriented, it presents a teaching method deemed appropriate to adult learners.

The CFJ's eLearning program is unique in a number of ways. First, learning is interactive and teacher-led. All classes use both synchronous – chats - as well as asynchronous methods - discussion boards. Some classes add a third mode: conventional classroom teaching. In particular, the core courses in the master's program are "hybrid", which is a combination of on-campus classes and online instruction. About a third of the class sessions are held online and the rest on-campus at the Ateneo campus in Manila. The eLearning software, WebCT, provides a stand-alone teaching and learning environment.

Second, learning in the CFJ online classroom is experiential and participative. The teaching-learning experience aims to create online learning communities. Third, class size is limited to 15 for the Master's courses and 25 in certificate courses. The larger size of the certificate courses takes into account the high attrition, inactivity or "lurker" rates usually observed in non-degree online classes.

Track record

The first CFJ online course began in 2001. Three years hence, CFJ remains the

only regional online journalism training program in Asia. As of end of 2003, CFJ has conducted 19 online courses - 14 exclusively online courses and five hybrid courses attended by 244 participants from 18 countries, including seven countries in the Pacific Islands. The range of topics delivered online can be gleaned from the line-up of CFJ courses in the last three years:

Table 1. List of CFJ online courses, 2001 – 03

2001

Investigative Reporting (hybrid)
Reporting Business (hybrid)
Covering Conflict
Media Ethics
Contemporary Issues in Media Law

2002

Reporting New Technology
Reporting the Stock Market
Newsroom Management
Reporting Food and Agriculture
Media Law: Press Freedom Issues
Online Journalism

2003

Media and Politics
Advanced Reporting and Writing
Media Ethics
Investigative Reporting
Reporting Information Technology
Online Journalism
Media and Politics

2004

Coaching Writers on Investigative Reporting

Uploading a course on the web

The first three years of the CFJ program generated considerable experience and data on the creation and effective delivery of an online journalism training program. The initial lesson learnt was the significantly higher attrition rate in online courses compared to conventional courses. To counter the high attrition, CFJ implemented five measures:

1) Increase class sizes from 12 to a maximum of 25 to ensure that a sizeable group of about 10 would stay until the end of the course.
2) Reduce the scope of the certificate courses from 16 to three or four modules which are taught in six weeks. The 16-module courses were prescribed only to the three-unit courses in the master's program.
3) Fast-track the development of the M.A. in Journalism which includes online courses.
4) Intensify marketing efforts for each course to recruit a good number of qualified participants.
5) Assign a staff to closely monitor teacher-student performance and to sound the alarm when the online presence of a teacher or student is waning or when the software is performing erratically.

The nuts and bolts of setting up the eLearning program can be summed up in two main stages: first, the infrastructure was built; second, the courses were created and delivered. Each stage involved a slew of details discussed in the next section.

Stage 1: Building the infrastructure

The infrastructure-building stage began with a groundbreaking, followed by work on the framework, very much like in a building project.   Among the steps necessary at this stage were:

First, there was a need to secure administrative recognition and support to ensure the legitimacy of the activity and the university's support, morally and materially. Ateneo's top management, no less than the university president, supported the program.

Second, the curriculum was developed. At CFJ, the online training program was designed initially to comprise short courses, which would become the building blocks of the coursework leading to the MA in journalism. Hence in its first two years CFJ only offered short courses, or certificate courses. In its third year, CFJ had developed enough courses and gained considerable experience to offer the MA program. The university's approval was obtained, which paved the way for the first batch of students who were all working journalists, all of them qualifying for full fellowships covering tuition, books and other expenses.

Third, human and physical resources had to be organized, including (a) management capability, i.e., consultants in software management, (b) course writers who may or may not double as instructors, (c) staff support, e.g., an instructional course designer, (d) equipment such as a dedicated server, (e) student and faculty handbooks in eLearning and (f) a marketing and communication plan to promote the courses.

Moreover, the online environment had to be designed. A decision on the software to be used for online instruction was made after a comprehensive review of available platforms. WebCT, which had a combined user base of more than 700 colleges and universities in 36 countries (Olgren, 2000) was found superior for several reasons: comparative effciency, ease of use and breadth of available functions.

Stage 2: Developing the courses

Stage One had to do with the larger picture. Detailed planning in Stage Two saw the courses created, reviewed, fine-tuned and delivered. This entailed four steps:

The first was the pre-production process, which involved:
- identifying the course and the course writer and/or instructor, and preparing the requisite administrative details, e.g., contracts, schedules;
- designing the course site;
- back-end programming;
- preparing admission and participation rules;
- preparing the registration packet which consists of the admission letter, student's manual, preliminary readings if any;
- preparing and disseminating the marketing and communication collaterals;

- recruitment, screening and acceptance of applicants;
- self-registration of participants.

Among the end products at this step were: a course description, a registration packet, and marketing collaterals in digital and print forms. A direct marketing strategy was employed to drum up interest in the courses and recruit participants.

In the next step, attention shifted mostly to the course writer, which mainly involved developing, writing and producing the course. The key activities at this stage were:

- orientating and training the course writer/instructor on the features and methods of online courses vis-à-vis conventional onsite courses;
- assigning an instructional design consultant to each course writer;
- preparing the syllabus;
- preparing instructional materials i.e. modules, supplementary readings in collaboration with the instructional design consultant who gave advise on online delivery methods, etc.; and lastly
- uploading the course.

"Course-taking" followed: the focus shifted from the course writer / instructor to the training participant. The students enrolled in the course and were given their passwords. If they had any technical problem, for instance, they forgot the password or could not download a file, a member of the eLearning team came to the rescue.

The instructors set the standards of participation, e.g. frequency of online presence, for a course. Students in certificate courses who did not meet the standards were dropped from the course or considered an "audit" student. This meant that the student could attend the course but was no longer entitled to personal feedback from the teacher and could only be awarded a 'certificate of attendance'. Students who met the course requirements such as papers and assignments were awarded a 'certificate of completion'.

Each course culminated in an evaluation by students and lecturers of each others' performance, the eLearning platform and the organizational support services.

Outcomes and learnings

What has CFJ achieved in eLearning? To assess its performance CFJ used three indicators: a) the complete delivery of a course; b) the cross-cultural origin of participants; c) the proportion of students finishing a course.

On the first count, the complete delivery of a course, CFJ scored highly: 16 of its 19 courses during a period of two years were conducted successfully. Two courses had to be aborted as they were floundering due to the poor online presence of the lecturers.

As to the second success indicator -- cross-cultural origin of participants -- the data show that as a whole cultural diversity flourished in most of the online classrooms. Except for two courses, that of media ethics and media law, the students in all the courses came from at least three different countries.

Table 2. **Origins of participants in CFJ online courses, by region and country.**

Asia

Philippines	134	(59%)
Indonesia	16	
Vietnam	16	
Nepal	14	
Bangladesh	11	
Malaysia	10	
India	9	
Thailand	7	
Mongolia	3	
Pakistan	2	
Singapore	1	
Subtotal	**224**	**(92%)**

Pacific Islands

Fiji	6	
Papua New Guinea	6	
Cook Islands	3	
Tonga	2	
Samoa	1	
Solomon Islands	1	
Vanuatu	1	
Subtotal	**20**	**(8%)**
Grand Total	**244**	

CFJ's performance along this variable could certainly be improved as 92% of the participants were Asians and among them, 55%, were Filipinos.

On the third measure of success - the proportion of students finishing a course -- the data show a high attrition rate among students who took the non-degree or certificate courses as against those who are taking the courses in the MA program. There was a zero drop-out rate among the MA students, and an average attrition rate of 35% in the certificate courses.

The literature is replete with references to high attrition rates in online courses. The normal attrition rate for online courses has been placed at between 20 to 50%, and in general, the figure is higher by 10 to 20% compared to traditional courses (Frankola, 2001).

Table 3. Number of participants, by online course. No. of courses: 8★

Course	Enrollees No.	Enrollees %	Completions No.	Completions %	% of Completion within the Course
Business Reporting	11	10.0	11	16.0	100
Media Ethics	10	9.3	7	10.0	70
Food and Agriculture	10	9.3	7	10.0	70
Media Law: Press Freedom Issues	10	9.3	7	10.0	70
Investigative Reporting	13	12.0	9	13.0	69
Reporting the Stock Market	16	15.0	10	14.0	63
New Technology	17	16.0	10	14.0	59
Newsroom Management	21	19.0	9	13.0	43
Total	108	100.0	70	100.0	

*Excludes two courses, which were withdrawn, and one course which was still ongoing at the time of this writing. Success factors

What accounts for a student's success in an online learning environment?

A survey of participants during the pilot phase in 2001 showed that technical problems – such as the inability to access the course because of downtimes, the slowness of downloading time -- were cited as the main reason for non-completion. Nevertheless, 65% of the CFJ online students completed their courses.

What contributed to the success of these students? From February to March 2003, 15 former CFJ students who completed their courses were interviewed and asked what motivated their learning, and the technical problems they encountered. Like the dropouts, almost all the respondents (13) experienced technical problems: downtimes, slow downloading pace, inaccessible chat room. However, these students persevered and went on to complete the course. Of the 19 reasons they cited to account for their motivation to finish, 47 % referred to the useful, relevant and interesting subject matter covered by their courses.

As to what helped them finish the course, 58% of the 19 responses pointed to "personal reminders and updates from the course instructor and CFJ staff." As mentioned earlier a staff member was assigned to closely monitor online class activities and to report whether students as well as teachers regularly attended their online classes, whether the students had downloaded the readings, whether the instructor had responded to the students' postings promptly, among others. Reminders were then sent to alert the students to class activities, course assignments and their level of participation.

The data support the findings of a study done in UCLA (Frankola, 2001) which showed that the online course completion rate shot up from 65% to 89% upon the introduction of a reminder system which, among others, notified students of their inactivity. Another helpful feature of the online courses, cited by many respondents, was the detailed course timetable.

The data also showed that successful online students tended to be those who:

- participated early and frequently,
- had a positive attitude or were well motivated to learn,
- had regular access to and habitually used the computer, especially the Internet,
- had a fair level of proficiency in English,
- had the support of their news organizations.

Moreover, the data indicated that not all teachers could perform well online. Some of the qualities, which were found linked to successful teaching in the CFJ online environment were:

- Skillful and creative networking or facilitating techniques
- Strong online presence
- Dedication
- Fair level of computer literacy

Challenges ahead

CFJ faces some challenges. The first is to enhance cultural diversity among students and lecturers alike. A possible solution lies in a concerted marketing effort to cast a wider net for lecturers and students from other countries in Asia and the Pacific Islands, and the offering of courses in the local language rather than in English. Second, CFJ will need to consolidate its technological and human resources to sustain its eLearning program. The lease of the eLearning software itself is prohibitive in view of the small sizes and number of the classes.

As society is transformed radically by information and communication technologies eLearning remains the most effective education platform for adult learners whose need and passion for learning never ceases. The CFJ program showcases that eLearning is both feasible and effective for the training of professional journalists in the region.

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