

5 : DISTRIBUTING EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

Distance teaching grew up in north-west Europe and North America in the age of the railways. Expanding and improving postal services meant that lessons could be sent quickly through the post and students' work could quickly be returned to a headquarters for marking. Today it is widely used in countries which have much greater problems of communication and in which population densities are lower. Efficient distribution of materials is a major problem for many distance teaching organisations.

It is not just a problem of distributing materials from the centre to the students. The essence of learning from correspondence is that there is a two-way flow, with work coming back from students for comment, advice and marking. And there is evidence that the sooner a student can get a response from his tutor, the better he will work. Frequent and regular two-way communication helps learning and helps motivation.

In practice, however, in many countries postal communication is slow. A first stage in establishing a distance-teaching organisation is to discover how quick the postal service actually is. You can do a postal survey by sending letters to specimen parts of the country and asking the recipients to tell you when they arrived and similarly checking the speed at which the replies come back to you. If the results suggest that you can reach virtually all of your students by post in two weeks or less, and they can reach you in the same length of time, then ordinary postal services will probably meet your needs. If you are using the post, it is, of course, necessary to have a good address for each student, and to consider whether students have the

same address in term and out of term.

But in many cases this will not be the case and it is necessary to examine alternatives.

Alternatives to the post

In some countries it has been found more convenient to deliver distance teaching materials to groups of students by road. The UNRWA/Unesco Institute found that they could deliver materials to all trainee teachers in refugee camps by having a regular delivery by lorry. Similarly, the Mauritius College of the Air, which organised courses for schools and for school teachers, found that in a small and densely populated island they could deliver materials to schools by van.

In larger and less densely populated countries, there may be a way round the problem by distributing materials from the centre to a regional headquarters and then having them sent on to study centres. If this solution is adopted then it may be better if students' work is marked by tutors at regional offices, rather than sent back to headquarters. Where there are enough study centres, so that no student lives far from one, then it may be possible for students to collect their work from a study centre. In Nigeria and Tanzania all lessons are sent to study centres, and students collect them from there.

Some distance-teaching projects, however, are smaller and could not think of having their own regional offices. In that case it may be possible to use other official or semi-official channels of communication. If teachers, or one teacher from each school, come to a central point each month to collect their pay, then it may be possible to distribute teaching materials and exchange marked and unmarked work at that time. This will usually give only a monthly turn around but this may still be better than one could achieve through the post.

The other ways of solving problems of distribution all take us back to the design of teaching materials and the teaching system within which they are working. In Swaziland, for example, the William Pitcher College arranged that students should attend a series of in-college courses. Each of these courses introduced the

work that students were to do when they went back home. With this kind of organisation, it is possible to distribute all the printed materials for the next session's work at the residential course.

That does not solve the problem of marking students' work and getting quick feedback to them. Here two solutions present themselves and both have a bearing on the general design of the distance-teaching project. First, it may be possible to employ mobile tutors who visit trainee teachers, or groups of them through the year and provide tutorials or give advice on work. This strategy was adopted both in Swaziland and for the Palestinian refugee camps. While rewarding for students, it places major burdens on the staff of the college. In Swaziland the staff were making 500 visits to students a year, making an average of 40 visits for each tutor.

Second, materials can be designed to stimulate local discussion, which makes rapid two-way postage less of a problem. In non-formal education, many distance teaching materials have been designed so that they can form the basis of a discussion between students who are working together in a group. Where one student has a problem, another may be able to solve it. And all can benefit from the discussion in which the group relates the information and ideas in the lessons to their own experience. If distance-teaching materials for teacher trainees are designed in the same way, and there are usually two or three teachers in any one place who are following the course, then some of the functions of two-way communication, which normally takes place between a student and tutor, can be undertaken by groups of students working together.

Distributing broadcasts

In the last chapter we referred both to radio broadcasts and to distributing tape recordings. If tape recordings are to be used, then the problems of distribution are exactly parallel to those of distributing printed matter, unless we also need to distribute batteries for students' recorders.

If we use radio, on the other hand, then our distribution problems should be much easier. Three difficulties may, however, arise. First, we may be offered broadcasting time at a time which is

inconvenient for our students. Often there is little that can be done about this: broadcasting stations like to reserve their peak hours for programmes which have the greatest public appeal - news, some music, and key information of public interest. It is difficult to argue that a specialist programme for teacher educators can compete for these slots. Second, broadcasting signals may not reach all parts of the country, or reach all parts equally well. Third, in many countries it is not easy or cheap to obtain radio batteries. Our students may press us strongly to provide these; and batteries, like print, need to be distributed physically.

These real difficulties may attract us towards the option of using cassette tapes rather than radio. But sound recordings lack the immediacy of radio and there is some evidence that students listen to recordings less than they listen to a radio programme, which they know they must hear at a fixed time or not at all. While it is often difficult to make a detailed comparison between the cost of distributing cassettes and the cost of broadcasting by radio, the cost to a distance-teaching organisation of using radio is often lower than the cost of using cassettes: this will generally be the case if a broadcasting station meets the cost of transmission while the cost of distributing tapes falls on the distance-teaching organisation.

Summary

1. In developing plans for distribution, keep in mind the need for information from students to flow to your institution, as well as the other way round.
2. Check whether the postal service is quick enough for your needs.
3. If it is not, consider:
 - 3.1 distributing materials to study centres, or to regional offices and then to study centres;
 - 3.2 using other channels of communication (e.g. distributing/collecting materials on teachers' pay day);

- 3.3 providing materials to trainees at residential courses, for them to use in succeeding months.
4. Student learning can be helped by mobile tutors.
5. Materials can be designed for student learning groups and to stimulate discussion in groups.
6. Distributing tapes is at least as awkward as distributing print.
7. Broadcasts may have the disadvantage of:
 - 7.1 inconvenient broadcasting time;
 - 7.2 not reaching all parts of the country adequately;
 - 7.3 relying on batteries which are scarce.