

Managing Distance and Lifelong Learning

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Managing Distance and Lifelong Learning Working Group focused first on how to tackle our task. The group discussed possible strategies for working on the topic and possible outcomes of each. We spent some time debating the meaning of the terms included in our charge. As we interacted with each other about our topic the following four questions emerged and guided the remainder of our conversation.

1. Who do we think will *manage* distance and lifelong learning?
2. What do we mean by the terms *distance* and *lifelong* learning and how are they related?
3. Is there a *model* or *framework* that would guide or support our discussion?
4. What *contribution* can our discussion group make to this topic?

2 WHO WILL MANAGE?

The working group quickly agreed that the management of distance and lifelong learning would depend on the conceptual perspective in play. Is the view one of the lone ranger (Bates, 2000) or that of the thousand flowers (Collis, 1999). Van Der Klink and Jochems (2004) talk about three levels of management: organizational, curricular, and individual course. However, our working group took a wider perspective. In one instance, an individual would be the best choice for managing his or her distance or lifelong learning activities. In another, while a department or working group might select an individual to manage the design, implementation, and delivery of

distance or lifelong learning, the task is conducted on behalf of a small collection of individuals. The organizational level would include more than one working group and require a more complex management strategy. Those who write about this at a public administration level, managing distance and lifelong learning would need to be constructed at the community level, quite possibly linking public and private sectors. At a much larger level, a society or a country would need to plan how this management function would best be conceptualized. Therefore, the answer to the question, who will do the managing depends on the perspective of those asking the question.

3 WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ‘DISTANCE’ AND ‘LIFELONG’ LEARNING AND ARE THEY RELATED?

As the working group moved to the task of defining the terms of our charge, we struggled with the term distance learning and quite naturally wanted to change it to e-learning. We immediately tried to distinguish between face-to-face, synchronous and asynchronous, and online learning, only to realize that online learning could actually be face-to-face but at a distance.

As for lifelong learning, the working group discussed the issue that the term was like a *slogan*, a frame of mind about learning, its context, and duration for human beings. For leaders of many countries, the term lifelong learning represents a kind of cultural strategy for improving the human condition. Lifelong learning is a much broader term than distance learning and could quite possibly be an umbrella term. Some members of the working group made excellent arguments for changing the term to lifelong education (LLE). To be sure, the integration of the terms ‘distance’ and ‘lifelong learning’ illustrate the mediating effect to be experienced by both. Distance learning enhances the process of lifelong learning or education while lifelong learning readily embraces the opportunities for distance or online learning opportunities.

4 IS THERE A ‘MODEL’ OR ‘FRAMEWORK’ THAT WOULD GUIDE OR SUPPORT OUR DISCUSSION?

The working group discussed several models that might guide our work. Some focused on instructional design while others focused on assessment. However, the charge to our working group was about management, not necessarily about design or assessment. So a model of leadership might be

more productive to guide our work. As the group continued to work, we found that the distributed leadership framework (Spillane, Diamond, & Halverson, 2002; Gronn, 2002) was most useful in organizing our work. The model can be simplified and conceptualized in the following terms: Actors, tools or artifacts, goals, rules, and both micro and macro tasks. Taken together and operating in an integrated fashion they create or exist within a community of practice. Each component is described below:

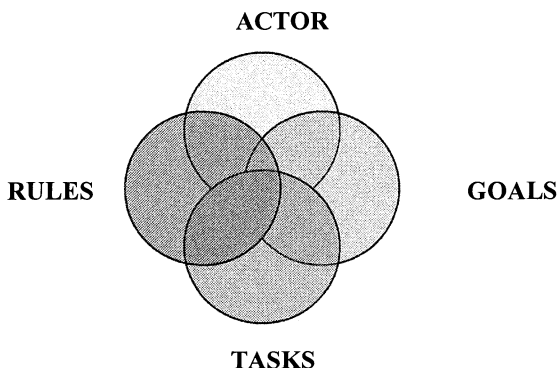


Figure 1. Distributed leadership for managing distance and lifelong learning.

ACTORS: Leadership is often distributed across multiple leaders: principals, assistant principals, curriculum specialists, reading or Title I teachers, and classroom teachers, ICT specialists, and others. Jochems, Van Merriënboer, and Koper (2004 p.xii) include additional players: Instructional designers developers of course materials, educational technologists, consultants, training department managers, faculty managers, course directors, and teachers and trainers at the post, and students in educational sciences interested in including distance or lifelong learning into the materials.

TOOLS & ARTIFACTS: Rather than treating material artifacts, tools, (e.g. curricular frameworks, teacher observation protocols) and organizational structures as backdrop for leaders’ practice, we see them as defining components of that practice. The structure of the technology and the design of the learning environments do indeed impact the levels of efficiency and effectiveness of learning outcomes. In their work, Van Merriënboër, Bastiaens, and Hoogveld (2004) argue that leaders should always ask if current and technological developments enable innovative instructional methods necessary to make learning more effective, efficient and appealing.

GOALS: Goals represent the intentions of the individual or learning group and as such become the focus of purposeful activity and learning.

Krischner, Strijbnos, and Kreijns (2004) outline six design principles as well as guidelines for task ownership, task character, and task control as goals for well designed online learning environments. Their underlying assumption is that goals should view learners as self-sufficient and in control of their own learning. Other authors provide different goals. Van Der Klink and Jochems (2004) describe three types of goals. The first is substitution where the new way replaces the traditional. The second is innovation where the current pedagogical and managerial perspective is rethought. Their final type is transformation, where radical change describes the outcome. The point we are making is that no matter the goal or the quest to achieve it, the goal should be distributed through the system.

RULES: These are criteria under which the community of practice tend to operate or the cultural view of the work of the group. They are created, modified, and policed by the group.

TASKS (Macro & Micro): A task perspective provides a framework for analyzing practice that enables us to attend to the daily work of school leadership without losing sight of the big picture. Macro tasks, or large scale organizational tasks involve constructing and selling an instructional vision of distance and life-long learning; building norms of trust, collaboration, supporting teacher (and others) development and training; monitoring instruction and innovation. Micro tasks or the day-to-day work involves creating opportunities for teachers to work together; creating in-service opportunities for teachers; completing classroom observations; distinguishing formative from summative observations.

In a community of practice focused on distance and lifelong learning, the work related to the managing of such can be mediated and informed by each element of the distributed model described above.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS FROM WORKING GROUP

In the end, our working group generated the following list of recommendations from our work on managing distance and lifelong learning. Listed below is our collective contribution.

- Create and foster learning environments in which people feel motivated to learn.
- Guard against decisions based on economy at the cost of better learning systems.
- Distribute the management of distance and life long learning.
- Expect learning to take many different paths.
- Provide multiple options, strategies, venues, and opportunities for learning.

- Create entrance options for any consumer to enter learning opportunities at appropriate levels for optimal learning.
- Ensure that technology helps to individualize instruction for learners and to provide personal preference.
- Provide opportunities for self-assessment of learning or diagnostics for helping consumers select appropriate learning activities.
- The new goal is to manage learning (coach) and not just to provide content.
- Avoid being trapped in the old paradigm of one teacher to a group of students but rather seek to help individuals or groups search for information or new content to be learned. Many times traditional learning modes crush a student's spirit of learning.
- Foster students taking responsibility for their own learning.
- Create activities, policies, practices that empower parents to play a stronger role in the education of their own children.
- Focus on the ICT side and track, record, and enhance the quality of learning activities.
- Base all decisions and activities on a strong ethical foundation.

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