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Author: S. Karunanayaka, D. Lekamge, C. Gunawardena, S. Naidu and M. Menon

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHER EDUCATORS WITH COLLABORATIVE LEARNING DESIGNS AND NETWORKING

**Shironica Karunanayaka¹, Dayalatha Lekamge¹,
Som Naidu² and Mohan Menon³**

¹*The Open University of Sri Lanka, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka*

²*The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia*

³*The Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver, Canada*

mmenon@col.org

Abstract

In order to address the growing need for quality teacher education in the South Asian Region, the Department of Education at the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) with the assistance of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) launched the Master of Arts in Teacher Education (MATE) – International Programme in February 2005. This paper describes the development of this programme and how it supports collaboration and networking among institutional partners, individuals, as well as countries, at various levels including programme design, pedagogical design and programme implementation. A unique feature of the programme is its pedagogical design, which uses authentic learning scenarios to situate learners in various key roles with challenging tasks to perform. This story-centered approach enhances development of critical skills and knowledge of teacher educators, while encouraging collaborative learning.

The learning environment for the programme consists of offline as well as an online resources, local study centre support with library, computer and Internet facilities, continuous assessment leading to the final evaluation, continuous monitoring, guidance and counselling which are designed to facilitate student learning, while encouraging communication among staff and students. The collaborative learning design of the programme, and the supportive learning environment facilitate networking among individuals as well as institutions. Once offered offshore, this network will expand further.

Introduction

Teacher education is an area of great significance in any country. Yet, in most instances, priority is given for professional development of teachers, over professional development of teacher educators, who would be training teachers. In Sri Lanka too, this aspect was somewhat neglected and a need for professional development programmes for teacher educators has been identified (National Education Commission; 1995). Addressing this unmet demand, in year 2000, a professional development programme especially designed for teacher educators in the country, the Master of Arts in Teacher Education (MATE) programme, was launched by the Department of Education at the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), under the World Bank-funded Teacher Education and Teacher Development (TETD) Project at Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka.

Later, recognizing the need to improve the quality of the programme, and to align it with the requirements of a prospective overseas clientele of teacher educators, the existing MATE programme was substantially revised and transformed into a unique practitioner-oriented programme, with the assistance of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). The transformation of the Programme continued throughout 2003-2004, and MATE – International (MATE-I) Programme, was launched in February 2005, initially with a pilot group of local teacher educators as the first cohort of students.

This novel programme is built upon the vast experience OUSL has in teacher education since its inception. By taking an innovative, practitioner-oriented approach to the professional development of teacher educators, it aims at enhancing quality in teacher education. Collaboration and networking is a

key feature seen at different stages of MATE-I programme. This paper describes the development of this programme and how it supports collaboration and networking among institutional partners, individuals, as well as countries, at various levels including programme design, pedagogical design and programme implementation.

Innovative Approaches in Professional Development of Teacher Educators

Educators face many new challenges today, such as adapting curriculum to meet new standards, adopting innovative teaching-learning approaches, changing from traditional assessment practices, and integrating technology into teaching and learning. Preparing the teachers to meet these challenges and enhancing the quality of teacher performance through alternative modes of professional development of teachers is currently an essential need.

The role of teacher educators, who would not only be training teachers, but also engaging in many other related activities including material development using new strategies and creating an active learning environment for their teacher trainees using appropriate techniques and resources, is of prime importance. They need adequate professional competence to function as effective teacher educators. Thus, quality professional development of teacher educators becomes critical to ensure quality teacher performance.

Effective educators are life-long learners, and their professional development must be an on-going process of gaining new knowledge, refining skills, adopting new methods and technologies and improving their decision making competence in varied contexts. Innovative approaches such as collaborative, reflective practices and use of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are considered essential to replace the existing conventional approaches in professional development programmes for educators (Menon, 2004).

Professional development must facilitate engagement of each educator in a collaborative dialogue with other educators and education partners to broaden their knowledge and expertise needed. Further, adoption of collaborative learning designs is identified as an indicator of quality teacher education (Naidu, 2004). Integration of cooperative and collaborative learning practices into the teaching and learning transactions in a professional development programme will benefit the learners in a significant way.

To meet the growing needs of training and re-training of teachers and teacher educators, teacher education institutions all over the world are seriously considering use of ODL approaches in professional development programmes. In a distance education professional development programme, where the need to address the issue of ensuring the desired levels of interaction among trainees and trainers is critical, a list of good principles to practice would be: make students well-informed of the courses, maintain good teacher-learner contact, apply an active learning process, encourage peer-supported learning, provide regular feedback, allow for appropriate pacing of learning through different tools and for mapping learning pathways to suit different learning styles (Dhanarajan, 2004).

ICT is a powerful tool in professional development as it allows educators to be creative thinkers, problem-solvers, risk-takers and innovators (Koufman-Fredrick et al, 1999). It can also easily support collaboration among educators via computer mediated collaborative learning environments. Use of online discussion forums are particularly valuable for continuing professional development courses, where participants can share and draw from each others' relevant professional experiences, especially, between individuals from different countries (Bates, 2003).

Enhancing Quality in Teacher Education Through Collaboration and Networking

Professional and academic networking and collaboration among individuals and organizations engaged in teacher education will have a great impact on enhancing the quality of the training-related processes (Menon, 2004). Collaboration is seen as a process of participation through which people,

groups and organizations work together to achieve desired results, involving the sharing of individual expertise and experience. Potential relationships of collaborators could be at five levels: Networking (Dialog and common understanding), Cooperation or Alliance (Match needs and provide coordination), Coordination or Partnership (Share resources to address common issues), Coalition (Share ideas and be willing to pull resources from existing systems), Collaboration (Accomplish shared vision and impact benchmarks, Build interdependent system to address issues and opportunities) (Bergstrom et al., 1995). Networking will initiate building up organizational and functional linkages among individuals, groups of people or organizations, who would in turn work together in collaboration to achieve the desired results.

Collaborations in the field of teacher education may exist in various ways, for instance, institutional collaboration, professional collaboration, collaborative learning and technology-supported collaboration. Institutional collaboration involves sharing resources of any type such as knowledge and expertise, infrastructure, human resources, services and costs with one or more partner institutions, within the same country or region, or anywhere in the world (Sharma & Chaudry, 2003). This is possible to occur in any area, including curriculum design, development and implementation, administration, student selection and admission, student support, and evaluation.

Networking and collaboration among teacher education institutions using alternative modes of course delivery will be beneficial to all partner institutions. Various possibilities of networking institutions for quality assurance in teacher education are, collaboration for sharing experiences, joint offer of courses, developing and implementing ODL/ICT-based professional development programmes, documenting flexible and innovative practices for teacher development, developing self-instructional courses, sharing of resources and exchange of personnel involved in teacher education (Menon, 2004). Hence it is evident that through institutional networking and collaboration, quality human, academic or technology resources can be developed or shared focusing on providing quality services in teacher education. It will also help institutions implement progressive, innovative ideas, allowing infusion of a 'global' culture, instead of relying solely on a local, campus-based culture (Sharma & Chaudry, 2003). This will also reduce the burden on an institution which attempts this endeavor alone, with limited resources – physical or human, especially when collaboration occurs among countries with more and less resources.

Institutional collaboration will invariably lead to professional collaboration among individual educators engaged in teacher education. This necessitates that educators cooperate and share their knowledge and skills with colleagues in their institutions and with professionals from other institutions within and across countries.. Team work of educators can make complex tasks more manageable, while stimulate new ideas, and encourage innovative practices. The extent of collaboration among individual educators may range from a basic level of sharing academic expertise in the teaching-learning process to higher levels of team teaching or planning together for programme development. The chances of success are greater when there is a sense of shared responsibility and the collective ownership of such activities, among the collaborators.

Encouraging learner collaboration in professional development programmes is another aspect of collaboration contributing to enhance quality of teacher education. Especially in most distance education systems where opportunities for students to meet frequently are limited by time, distance or resources, different types of student support groups, which may or may not include a teacher, are included to facilitate learner interaction (Robertshaw, 2000).

Unlike cooperative learning which proceeds through empathetic sharing of old knowledge, collaborative learning proceeds through empathetic discovery of new knowledge co-constructed by the participants, and thus all participants become *owners* and *knowers* of the new knowledge (Kawachi, 2003). Hence, collaborative learning promotes the development of a learning community where learners share common interests and work together toward their common goals.

As Jonassen, Peck & Wilson (1999) describe, learning communities can be fostered by having the learners research and share information in the pursuit of a meaningful, consequential task. In such situations, emphasis should be placed on the social and cognitive contribution of a group of learners, with students collaborating and supporting each other towards commonly accepted learning goals, rather than forcing students to conform to pre-packaged instructional requirements. Hence, while all learners become owners of the new knowledge in a learning community, it also supports reflection on the knowledge constructed and the processes used to construct it by the learners (Jonassen et al., 1999).

Scenario-Based Learning (SBL) is a learning design that offers opportunities for collaborative learning. In SBL, learners are presented with authentic situations (i.e. scenarios) in the form of a storyline in which students are required to assume a key role that they might actually perform in real life, and engage in challenging activities leading to achievement of the desired learning outcomes. Students may work in small groups with the help of detailed information about the simulated context, supporting resources and mentors available to guide them. (see Naidu, Menon, Gunawardena, Lekamge & Karunanayaka, 2005a, for a more detailed discussion of SBL).

Technology can be effectively used to support interaction and socialization among individuals, enhancing collaboration. Especially in distance education systems where opportunities for students to meet frequently are limited by time, distance or resources, ICT can play a major role. Tools such as tele-conferencing, e-mail, conferencing and chat rooms facilitate a variety of collaborative and group learning possibilities. Conferencing could be both synchronous and non-synchronous and both have their own advantages. Computer-based conferencing can support discussions, debates and collaborative efforts among groups of people who are at a distance, and it also enables learners to reflect on their ideas or responses before making them (Jonassen et al., 1999).

However, for any successful technology integration in professional development programmes, factors such as ICT availability and accessibility, technology literacy and a commitment to ICT use are essential. Any technological solution for collaboration such as audio conferencing, video conferencing or virtual discussion groups would require identifying necessary skills and providing suitable training, and the additional burden this places on the learners could be a disincentive to participation unless benefits are quickly realized (Robertshaw, 2000). Further, despite the fact that introducing electronic networking systems to facilitate collaborative learning is significant, the institutions need to ensure that courses are well designed, and that the use of networked technologies adds value and is integral to learning (Haughey, 2000).

The MATE (International) Programme: Innovative Features

The MATE-I Programme is a unique practitioner-oriented professional development programme offered to teacher educators, in the distance mode. With the overall aim of ‘making a reflective teacher educator’, it is envisaged that as a result of following this programme, the teacher educators will develop competencies in the areas of teaching and learning, use of educational technologies, design, development, and evaluation of curricula, management and leadership, research and evaluation and teaching as a profession. (see also Gunawardena, Menon, & Naidu, 2004; Karunanayaka, Lekamge, Gunawardena, Naidu, & Menon, 2005; MATE-International -Programme Handbook, 2004; Naidu, Menon, Gunawardena, Lekamge & Karunanayaka, 2005a; Naidu, Menon, Gunawardena, Lekamge & Karunanayaka, 2005b).

MATE-I programme consists of six compulsory courses and a portfolio project. Printed materials and multimedia resources including a Study Guide with detailed study schedules and a Resource Pack, comprise the major forms of student support while contact sessions with the local tutors provide opportunities for closer interaction. In addition, local study center support with library, computer and Internet facilities are provided. Electronic media such as web pages on programme information, on-line provision for tutor support and assignment submission, and an online discussion forum to facilitate student interactions are also provided. There is no final examination, while continuous assessment leads

to the final assessment in a course. Continuous feedback, monitoring, guidance and counseling for students are provided. An ongoing monitoring and evaluation procedure is also being implemented, concurrently with the programme.

The first cohort of students in the pilot programme consists of Sri Lankan teacher educators from different institutions throughout the country. The collaborative design of the programme, and the supportive learning environment facilitate networking among individuals as well as institutions. Once offered offshore, this network will expand further.

In this professional development programme, the concept of collaboration and networking is seen at three main levels -- programme design, pedagogical design and programme implementation.

Collaboration and Networking: Programme Design

In programme design, collaboration and networking commenced from the point of planning and developing the curriculum to its fruition as a completed programme viable to be offered to students which took place in several stages over a period of two years.

In Stage 1, towards December 2002 the collaboration was limited to that between the Programme Development Team and Sri Lankan experts from other conventional universities engaged in teacher education. With the entry of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) as a major sponsor, interested in enhancing the quality of the programme to international standards to be offered off-shore, in Stage 2, February 2003, international experts from COL, India, Bangladesh and Australia joined the OUSL academics and their Sri Lankan counterparts at an Experts' Meeting on internationalizing the MATE Programme. Close collaboration among the members of the group enabled the review of exiting curricula to be carried out successfully.

Recognizing the need to orient the programme to be more learner-centered and practitioner-oriented and in order to develop an innovative, constructivist learning design, in Stage 3, August 2003, an Advanced Training Workshop was held with the facilitation of Prof. Som Naidu, University of Melbourne. At this Workshop, the Course Development Team realized the strength of the Scenario-Based Learning (SBL) approach, and decided to adopt this learning design for each course.

Stage 4, March 2004, witnessed the development of specific courses of the programme, development of and further refinement of detailed study schedules, learning scenarios, learning and assessment activities by OUSL Course Development Teams monitored by Prof. Mogana Dhamotheram, University of Malaya, to be finalized at a Workshop facilitated by Prof. Som Naidu.

At the next stage, Stage 5 (September, 2004), finalizing of all course materials such as Essential Readings, inclusion of other resources such as Additional Readings that had been identified in Resource Packs could be completed at a Workshop facilitated by Prof. Som Naidu.

Stage 6 (September 2004-January 2005), represented the final stage of the development of the Programme. Reviewing, and editing of course materials by identified experts from UK, India, Singapore and Australia and improving course materials by OUSL Course Development Teams took place during this stage.

Collation of course materials- the Programme Brochure, the Study Schedules and the Resource Packs, ready for distribution to the students, was the culmination of a prolonged collaborative effort, signifying a partnership between two major institutions, the Commonwealth of Learning and the Open University of Sri Lanka, dedicated to distance education. In this process, the determination of the beneficiary institution matched the financial resources allocated to the task by the funding institution. Collaboration between these two institutions gradually grew into a collaboration among a group of individuals, who came together, embarking on a journey, to share their expertise and varied experiences from different parts of the world, to develop a programme for teacher educators which

they believed would be truly international and worthy of their diligent perseverance over a lengthy period of time.

Collaboration and Networking: Pedagogical Design

A unique feature of the MATE-I programme is its pedagogical design- Scenario-Based Learning (SBL), which offers opportunities for collaborative learning. It focuses on the various roles of a teacher educator – a teaching-learning specialist, curriculum developer, educational technologist, educational manager and leader, researcher and a professional, rather than on specific subject matter content. In this approach, authentic learning scenarios, those reflecting the kinds of situations that students are likely to confront as teacher educators, are used to situate learners, and these situations are used to orchestrate the learning and assessment activities in each course as challenging tasks to perform.

Completion of a learning portfolio is another requirement that promotes reflective learning of students. Through compiling and reflecting upon the work they complete in achieving learning outcomes of each course, each learner will critically reflect on his/her individual work as a teacher educator, which will result in developing a culture of critical reflection among the group, and together they will be able to learn from their successes achieved and mistakes made.

The collaborative learning design of the programme, and the supportive learning environment facilitate networking among individuals as well as institutions. Focusing students' attention on critical reflection and problem-solving activities promotes a more learner-centred focus and encourages collaboration among learners, by way of sharing ideas, experiences and resources. In addition to facilitating face-to-face student group discussion at contact session held at study centres, an online discussion forum moderated by the programme coordinator, is also provided to enhance student interaction.

Collaboration and Networking: Programme Implementation

The pilot programme was implemented with a group of Sri Lankan teacher educators from different institutions throughout the country, representing all nine provinces. Although the first cohort of students are only local, the collaborative design of the programme, facilitated networking among these individuals representing different teacher education institutions, from different parts of the country. The limited number of contact sessions also adopted a new collaborative approach, where two or more of the course team members participate in a session rather a single lecturer making a presentation, encouraging students to participate actively, without inhibition and as equals with the academic staff.

When the MATE-I Programme is offered offshore, this network will expand further. OUSL is currently in the process of identifying partner distance education institutions from other countries in the South Asian region, and Sub Saharan Africa. Once initial networking is done with the interested institutions, these will need to function as local study centres with tutor, library and computer laboratory facilities for overseas students, and numerous collaborative activities will have to take place. Country coordinators should be appointed in each institution, and local tutor training should take place.

Continuous monitoring and evaluation of the initiative has been continuing since the commencement of the pilot programme, with the facilitation of an international expert under COL support. The evaluation focuses on finding out the challenges faced by students as well as academic staff in adopting this new approach to professional development of teacher educators.

Lessons Learnt

The collaborative design employed in the development of the MATE-I programme has succeeded in producing an innovative professional development programme for teacher educators, which is truly practitioner-oriented. Acceptance of the new instructional approach, SBL, by staff and students was evident.

The course team approach adopted in designing and developing the MATE-I programme was very effective in producing six innovative courses. It enabled cooperation and sharing of knowledge and skills among academics from different institutions, who had diverse expertise and experiences. Continuous facilitation of foreign experts at various phases of the planning stage, further enhanced this professional collaboration. Team work of professionals resulted in developing a sense of shared responsibility and a collective ownership of the courses developed, among all engaged in the task.

The learners are increasingly engaging in collaborative, reflective and self-regulated learning. This collaborative learning experience is of immense value to the group of learners who are in the pursuit of a common goal. Especially for the isolated learners in the distance mode, where frequent student interaction is limited, facilitation of collaboration via carefully designed learning activities, and online support was very useful. The experiences they gain are not only mastering the concept of SBL, but also extend to learning as a group, about the varied scenarios that the teacher educators are confronted with as the delivery of the programme takes place in the form of multi-mode interactions/discussions rather than one-way communication. While learning together about the SBL approach which was novel to all learners, a sense of achievement is observed to be developing among the learners, as a group.

Concluding Notes

The MATE-I Programme is a unique professional development programme for practicing teacher educators. Development of global partnerships is a key feature observed in this programme. Collaborative designs and networking that has been applied to the programme has had significant implications on enhancing quality professional development of teacher educators.

Collaboration and networking is significantly observed throughout the design, development and implementation of the programme. In each stage of this programme, a high sense of empowerment of teachers as well as learners is observed to be taking place in several ways. One of the most significant benefits that accrued to academic staff that engaged in this endeavour was the opportunity to learning together about SBL and moving towards the single direction of situated learning. The learners, in turn, are becoming more confident in being situated in authentic scenarios, and facing challenging tasks as they proceed with the study programme. The final result, it is hoped, would be the development of a learning community, with a shared understanding and ownership of this exciting and challenging learning experience.

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Authors

Dr. Shironica Karunanayaka is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Education in the Faculty of Education at the Open University of Sri Lanka. She holds B.Sc. Degree from the Open University of Sri Lanka and Ed.D. in Information Technology in Education and Training from University of Wollongong, Australia. Her research interests are in the areas of ICT in teaching and learning, instructional design and online learning.

Address: Dept. of Education, Faculty of Education,
The Open University of Sri Lanka,
Nawala, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka
e-mail: spkar@ou.ac.lk

Dr. Dayalatha Lekamge is a Senior Lecturer and Head of the Department of Education in the Faculty of Education at the Open University of Sri Lanka. She holds B.Ed. and M.Phil. Degrees from University of Colombo and Ph.D. from the Open University of United Kingdom. Her research interests are in the areas of distance education, teacher education and social issues related to children.

Address: Dept. of Education, Faculty of Education,
The Open University of Sri Lanka,
Nawala, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka
e-mail: gdlek@ou.ac.lk

Prof. Chandra Gunwardena is the Senior Professor of Education and the Dean of the Faculty of Education of the Open University of Sri Lanka. She also served as the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in the Open University for six years. Prof. Gunawardena holds Bachelors and Masters degrees from the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka and a Ph.D. degree from the La Trobe University, Melbourne. Prof. Gunawardena worked as a senior academic in the University of Colombo prior joining the Open University. She is an active researcher and has numerous publications to her credit in international and national refereed journals.

Address: Dept. of Education, Faculty of Education,
The Open University of Sri Lanka,
Nawala, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka
e-mail: ggunawardena@hotmail.com

Dr. Som Naidu is Associate Professor in Educational Technology at The University of Melbourne in Australia. He has published widely on the subject of online learning and the integration of technology into teaching and learning. Dr. Naidu is Executive Editor of the journal Distance Education and serves on the Editorial Advisory Boards of several other related journals. He also serves as a Series Editor of the Routledge Falmer book series on Open and Flexible Learning published by the Taylor and Francis Group

Address: Information and Education Services, Information Division,
The University of Melbourne,
VIC, Australia, 3010.
e-mail: s.naidu@unimelb.edu.au

Professor Mohan Menon who is doctorate in instructional designing, is Education Specialist, Teacher and School Development, Commonwealth of Learning (COL) since 2001, responsible for teacher and school developments initiatives. He has about 30 years of research, teaching and administrative experience. He taught at the Centre of Advanced Study in Education, Baroda and later was Planning Officer and Director of School of Education, IGNOU and also Chairman, National Institute for Open Schooling, India. He has a wide international experience and has been visiting scholar in the

University of Leeds, University of Northern Carolina and COL and also consultant for several international agencies including UNDP, UNICEF, DANIDA, ILI and COL

Address: Commonwealth of Learning (COL)
1055 West Hastings Street, Suite 1200,
Vancouver, BC V6E 2E9 Canada

e-mail: mmenon@col.org