

A Different “Network”: Special Populations and Partnerships in DE

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Overview

Current distance education practices are evolving for reaching and retaining special populations of learners. Whether students with disabilities, cultural barriers, limited English language skills or other difficulties, these learners have had little access to education in the past. Building upon the metaphor of a network bridge, this session addresses both the management and the instructional practices that connect teachers and learners, with a special focus on partnerships and diverse populations. Based on an analysis of over 50 federally funded projects, this paper represents a brief digest of the basis for the session held at the conference. A lengthy discussion of research regarding these distance education topics and many others are covered in a full length edited volume to be released in Fall 2005, edited by King and Griggs (see reference list).

Introduction

In a field using technology, we created a metaphor that used a technology term to describe the relationship among the concepts we were studying. Thinking about serving special populations through distance education partnerships, we considered the greatly valued and utilized “Network Bridge.” This network device or “structure” enables communication between points in local area networks. In the same way we consider that distance education fundamentally connects (the bridge) our special populations with educational opportunities in varied ways (the network image). That is, distance education has the capability of bridging special learner and subgroup populations with learning opportunities in a great variety of ways.

The evaluation design of this paper and session presents and analyzes findings within and across many funded distance education projects. These projects were funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) and many of them were under the specific funding of the Learning Anytime Anywhere Partnerships (LAAP) grants. This holistic and yet differentiated perspective provides discernment of issues, trends, and best practice as seen across different contexts, organizations, delivery modes, and program designs.

This broad yet differentiated vantage point allows promising practices to emerge across many different contexts, organizations, program designs, resources, and technologies. While many research studies and conference sessions enable participants to focus on individual projects in great depth, this research and paper provide a broader view of our ever-changing distance education field.

Representative of a much larger work, this paper shares findings regarding one major area serving special populations through distance education programs and how partnerships among organizations can be pursued to benefit distance education pursuits (King & Griggs, In press). These findings address issues and trends in design, instruction, management and collaboration, questioning assumptions that underlie policy and practice as illustrated in these national projects.

Special Populations

Definition

Not surprisingly, those populations vulnerable to exclusion from postsecondary education are in many instances the same groups also at risk of being left out of distance education. These include students from historically disadvantaged minority groups, as well as students from a lower socioeconomic status, who are not native speakers of English, or identify as disabled (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1995, 2002). It is from this body of experience that the definition of special populations is drawn.

Themes of Recruitment, Retention, Instruction and Access

Four critical themes have emerged as we reflect on the needs for special populations today: access to education; access to technology; inclusion in education through technology; and designing for success in technology-based education (Gibson, In Press). Education must be flexible for today's working adult learner; it must recognize the vocations that often require adults to move within and between states each year; it must provide training for those differently abled or homebound; and it must strive to offer a flexible pace for students with limited language skills and limited computer skills. The solution can be found in distance education, through the use of technology for teaching and learning, but this brings us back to one critical theme: access to technology.

Partnerships for Access

In our forthcoming book we describe how several LAAP projects tackled these themes through a variety of partnerships that sought to address one or more critical issue (Gibson, in King and Griggs, In Press). The Montana Consortium and the University of Wisconsin System Administration's Alcanza grant each recognized the need to serve adults whose vocation moved them and their families throughout the year by addressing access to technology. Several projects (Alcanza, Project CONNECT, University of Iowa) addressed the challenge of language barriers through multiple language teaching or imbedded glossaries, while others sought to develop culturally appropriate courses and experiences (Montana Consortium). Partnerships also existed between communities of ethnically diverse learners and colleges that sought to support learners, enhance retention, develop technical literacy, and offer professional networking and career exploration services (Hispanic Educational Telecommunications System (HETS), Alcanza).

Alcanza is an example of a dynamic partnership that continued to change and evolve to serve the needs of migrant families. Initially, the University had two key partners, the Midwest Food Processing Association and the United Migrant Opportunity Services, but soon a job center joined the project based on a shared interest in serving migrant families, as did a small literacy council that served diverse populations. The Department of Public Instruction joined informally with an interest in serving the children of migrant workers while other school districts became aware of Alcanza's computer-based educational tools and scaffolded on the use of these tools. (Foreshadowing our partnership discussion-key elements to note regarding this successful partnership are that the partners had key interests and expertise to invest.)

The **Montana Consortium** is an example of building partnerships based on past relationships, but like Alcanza over time, change in one or more partners is a constant challenge to the viability of programs. Partners are lost, others are gained, and changes in administration within key partners may also negatively impact programs as a result of less support for such collaborations. Relationship-building is an ongoing task for all who are involved and committed to the success of these collaborations.

Addressing Needs

Addressing the needs of special populations within distance education programs means recognizing the challenges these learners bring with them. **Project CONNECT**, for example, learned in the process of evaluating their educational modules that learners' goals focused on learning to speak informal English, not their reading abilities as the modules were designed to accomplish. The University of Iowa's formative evaluations revealed that their educational modules were user friendly and easy to navigate; however, it also revealed that learners had little or no technical experience.

“Network Bridge” Connection

Indeed in the world of university and distance education partnerships serving the needs of special populations is a delicate and complex technological feat. The metaphor of the “network bridge” emphasizes the need for upfront, honest and frequent communication among partners in what they need to gain and are able to offer the partnership and project. This metaphor also illustrates the complexity of finding ways to connect the multitude of needs of special populations in order to *leverage* demand and provide resources. Consortiums, grassroots organizations and connections are different ways to interpret this technological image.

Partnerships

Definition

In meeting the great demands and challenges of distance education, higher education institutions often develop partnerships in order to maximize resources, gain additional expertise that they would not otherwise have and divide responsibilities. In our research we have found it helpful to distinguish between common arrangements of shared activities among organizations – “collaborations” and more formal commitments of partnerships. The Wilder research group defines a high-level collaborative, what we term a partnership, as “a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals. The relationship includes commitment to mutual

relationships and goals; a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability for success and sharing of resources and rewards” (Mattessich, Murray-Close, & Monsey, 2001, p. 4). Such a definition begins to reveal some of the intricacies in trying to balance competing organizational perspectives, needs and interests fundamentally inherent to partnerships.

Insights

Our research among these distance education partnerships led to several insights about forming partnerships and meeting the challenges to successfully recruit, retain, instruct and support special populations of learners. Among these are: having history, compatibility, organizational culture, partner relationships are challenging, and importance of structure. Regarding “having history” organizations and planners need to realize that when they consider forming partnerships having prior positive histories with organizations is a powerful basis for a successful future partnership. Lewis reminds us of Bear and Duin’s research in 2004 which observed that among the FIPSE LAAP grants,

“Successful projects—i.e., those that met their goals and were continuing to evolve and become sustainable—were in most cases those that had been built by partners who were part of a consortium or alliance prior to the LAAP project. The presence of this pre-existing trust and relationships proved extremely valuable. “Partners were able to get started more quickly, were less likely to encounter unforeseen political and philosophical obstacles, and were more likely to remain committed to the LAAP project because of the consortia foundation” (Bear & Duin, cited in Lewis[in press]).

Concerning compatibility, partnership planners need to carefully assess indicators of compatibility from personal, personnel and organizational levels. This compatibility dimension directly interplays into issues of organizational culture in that trying to develop partnerships where different organizations have to communicate, plan, and make difficult decisions at times is very difficult when organizations look at education, budgets and enrollments with very different values and goals. Even when the individuals who may be forging the partnership have a oneness of vision and purpose, the organizations and managements need to be aligned, or provisions made from the beginning to allow for the differences, or there will be continuing great difficulty (King & Melia, 2005).

There is no way to avoid the fact that partner relationships are challenging, take a great deal of time, effort, focus and good will in order to be successfully sustained. Partnerships are formal organizational arrangements, but at the same time they are contingent on maintaining good relationships within the structures of those formal arrangements. Herein is the final insight we propose at this time- structure. Establishing agreed upon processes and structures are a support and safeguard for relationships and integrity in partnerships. They can ensure that responsibilities are fulfilled and if not, action can be taken without personal angst. They can provide the basis for supporting partners having difficulty and to draw alongside a partner who needs additional guidance or redirection. We would also propose that structures should be pursued as friendly aids and not demands, as assistance in guiding the working relationship to success. Additionally we see the power of structures to be informed by data and evaluation continually so that they can be revised and improved (King & Melia, 2005). Dynamic structures may seem to be a contradiction of terms to some traditional administrators, but for successful partnerships in the ever-changing world of distance education they are survival.

Resources

We also consider the resources that are available for organizations to develop and support partnerships in distance education. Most obviously people consider financial concerns when one states “resources” and this is of course of great concern for partnerships. In this respect a valuable approach is to build a diversified financial base for the partnership endeavors and sustainability. That is, rather than exclusively relying on public funding, the leadership should continue to plan and pursue other sources as well, including private funding, private grants, corporate partnerships, and less frequently, contracts and “fee for service” income streams, and the sale of products, patents and intellectual property rights and royalty payments.

However in our perspective of partnerships, people are critical resources for success. One needs to consider the people within the organization who provide strong leadership, vision and trust and generosity. In planning partnerships one also needs to be sure to enlist current and future organizational support and leadership from the very beginning. Even when individuals have great interest in proceeding with projects, they need to gain the full understanding and support of the organization in order to build a base of sustainability. This base of support will be invaluable in times of uncertainty, challenges and conflict among partners and outside conditions. Within the partnership, establishing guiding principles, regular communications and management processes and routines will serve as powerful “resources” to support the relationship and project during the times of plenty and times of difficulty.

“Network Bridge” Connection

The metaphor of the “network bridge” provides an image and model of a *technological resource* of a *dynamic* partnership that allows for *constant communication*. Data is continually transmitted and used to facilitate and guide additional decision making and planning. The “bridge” is at once a structure and communication channel. Rather than looking at a distance education partnership as an organizational alliance on paper, the “network bridge” provides a vital *communicator and contributor* that holds, facilitates, and supports the relationships through the many changes they will encounter. Not defining the relationship, but serving it to the purposes the people and organizations need it to serve.

Conclusions

The “Network Bridge” metaphor incorporates the complexity, or web, of distance learning. In a rapidly changing technological and global society we realize how much we are connected and yet we still need to better understand the implications of that reality. For example, as we partner with organizations of different political and socio-culture bases and as learners have widely different degrees of technology access and experience, what does it mean for planning and designing our distance education programs? Considering these issues of varied needs of special populations of learners and partnering organizations the network bridge can be a valuable frame for our ongoing relationships, planning and thinking as a *dynamic communicator and contributor*.

Author’s Note: Dr. King would like to recognize the contribution of Dr. Susan Biro of Fordham University for her contribution in authoring this paper.

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