The Imperative of Retaining Contact with the Remote Distance Learner: A Perspective from Uganda

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INTRODUCTION Although distance education embraces a wide continuum of delivery systems ranging from 'very open and purely correspondence' to packages containing a combination of correspondence with formal face-to-face opportunities, experience has shown that the face-to-face factor is *essential* to the success of a distance education delivery system (Perry and Rumble, 1992, 15).

This face-to-face component in itself ranges from (a) that with the more predictable functions-periodic tutorials, field tutor-based support, residentials, group meetings, and so on, to (b) the more informal, casual, spontaneous and essentially personal contact, with quite different functions envisaged than in the more conventional face-to-face component. Both of these enhance the two-way communication between the tutor and the student which Baath refers to as being at the *heart* of, and the *backbone* to, a distance education delivery system (Baath, 1992, 36).

The Ugandan perspectives to be outlined here promote the second view above, that the on-going, spontaneous, personal contact enhances the 'standpoint of the student learning at a distance' rather than just the 'standpoint of the institution teaching at a distance' (Jenkins and Koul, 1991, 107). Where this aspect of the face-to-face has been refined and encouraged (in an almost infinite variety of forms, and in response to an infinite variety of individualised learner needs) learning has been enhanced, motivation is higher, and learner retention rates have been much more impressive. A Ugandan experience,

with its distinctive context (combining attributes with constraints) is presented.

THE UGANDAN EXPERIENCE The Northern Integrated Teacher Education Project (NITEP) is a primary teacher-training programme being delivered in the ten districts of northern Uganda, through three regional administration offices (refer to Figures 1 and 2). This area has been damaged by years of warfare and a residual insurgency is continuing. The programme is part of an emergency, politically-driven reconstruction programme in the north of the country.
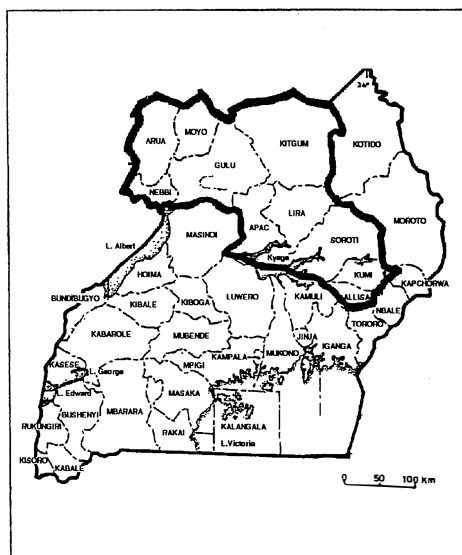

Figure 1. Uganda showing the location of the NITEP Project Area

The programme is *integrated* in the respect that it is training teachers who are already in the field, and it is using existing primary teachers' colleges and professional staff in the districts, through which to deliver and support the programme. Three thousand untrained teachers are undertaking a three-year, one-cycle, programme using a predominantly distance education methodology. This method, by having the learners (in this case the untrained primary teachers) remain in their home and work contexts, is proving to be more attractive in the Ugandan environment because:

- this large number of teachers could not be replaced in the classrooms of the north if they were to be released for a conventional full-time programme;
- there is insufficient capacity in the existing teachers' colleges to train this number as quickly as is required by the political motive of rapidly reconstructing the war-ravaged north of Uganda;
- the learners, themselves, have families and subsistence economic ties at home, in the villages, which makes a prolonged absence in a far-distant teachers' college unattractive;
- the programme, targeting such a large number of teachers, is perceived as being cost effective;
- the programme, designed as it is, as being on-the-job, means that learning can be *applied* immediately, resulting in a momentum of improved teaching (and learning) in northern primary classrooms which, for so long, have been degrading.

The three thousand students are mostly 'O' level completers (from the third and fourth quartiles), with a very small minority having advanced to 'A' levels. They have been teaching, on an average, for about five years in the very poorly resourced, mostly rural, village primary schools. Most are married, many are not being paid (and yet continue to teach!!); what pay they do get is very meagre (around $NZ20 per month); and they have very poor (at best !) to no study facilities resources. Because of this they are heavily tied to their village locations, eking out a subsistence living for themselves and their families.

To be thrown in to a distance education study programme has been an enormous burden to them, but also a challenge that most have taken on with enthusiasm. Their futures in the Ugandan education system depend upon their passing the public Teachers' Certificate examination at the end of the three year programme of study. Remuneration for trained teachers is gradually improving: this, in itself, provides longterm incentive enough in a country where economic and professional poverty have become deeply entrenched.

THE DISTANCE EDUCATION DELIVERY SYSTEM
The basis of the methodology used in this distance model is a set of learner-focused modules based on the Primary Teacher Education Curriculum. These modules represent the *core* of the learner's experience. A total of twenty of these modules (each of between two and three-hundred pages) have been written and are being supplied over the three-year period, along with a series of supplementary print-based materials such as action sheets, logbooks and newsletters, as well as audio tapes.

These modules are not textbooks.

> *They contain information just as textbooks do, but they are designed to involve the student in this information and in its practical application. The 'activities' serve to promote interactivity between the learner and the modules to instigate the learning process. They have been designed to focus on the learning outcomes, thus they are repeatedly reinforced. These interactive strategies are sometimes referred to as 'embedded support devices' (Shelley, 1995, 2).*

This 'core' which, for the NITEP learner, represents a huge reading burden (even more so as it is being imposed upon a non-reading culture) is supplemented by a complex student support system, comprising over seven hundred field-based personnel performing a range of pedagogical, counselling and administrative functions, which will be outlined, further below.

There is then in Uganda a unique learner context: it comprises remote field situations, with related communication difficulties; poorly resourced schools; harsh employment

conditions for the teacher (the NITEP student); on-going problems of insecurity; very difficult economic circumstances; and the lack of an entrenched reading culture.

It has become apparent that the student support system, with its planned formal components as well as its ever-evolving informal components, has become crucial to the success of the programme, as it passes its halfway point. While the materials and formal pedagogy are highly regarded, and an administrative and records system is now well developed, the ability of the programme implementors to retain contact with, and specific knowledge of, the learners in their contexts, has become pivotal.

THE STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEM AS THE FOCUS OF CONCERN

The NITEP Student Support System can be broadly categorised into two distinct levels: the formal and the informal. The *formal* levels have five basic components.

First, the Coordinating teachers' colleges. These are cooperating primary teachers' colleges from where all learning programmes are coordinated in a district. In each district there is one coordinating teachers' college, and at this institution there is a senior tutor who is employed by the programme on a part-time basis to implement the field activities. He is called the *Student Support Officer* (SSO), who is facilitated with a motorcycle as a means of transport. The SSO is instrumental in ensuring the successful implementation of the student support system in the district.

Second, at twice-monthly weekend tutorials the students are guided in their studies by a *Tutor Counsellor* (TC) who, in most cases, is a trained and in some other nearby locality. Between ten and 30 students are allocated to this TC at a *Study Centre* (SC) dependent upon student distribution. The TC also plays an additional administrative role in our system: s/he provides the main link between the students and the remainder of the support system. This means that s/he will not only run these fortnightly tutorials at the SC but will also visit each student

in their respective schools, as well as ensuring, in the absence of an effective postal system, that students' assignments are passed to the *Tutor Markers* (TM) for marking, and then returned to the student. He will also maintain records of, and monitor, students' progress.

Third, twice-yearly residential sessions are supported by a team of subject-specialist tutors referred to in our system as *Residential Tutors* (RT). At each residential the RTs have two weeks of intensive contact with the students guiding them in those areas that have been found difficult during either their private study, or at the tutorials with their TCs.

Fourth, the *Tutor Markers* (TM) are subject specialists who mark the student assignments in their areas of speciality. Their main concern is to provide meaningful and interactive feedback to the students. They have been specially trained to do this. The comments given by the TM need to be direct, and yet in conversational tone. With the comments also goes an assignment grade.

Fifth, the other cadre of player in our formal support system is the *Personal Tutor* (PT). S/he provides the most familiar contact with the student. Usually s/he will be teaching on the same staff with the student. The PT offers professional development advice and a model to the student through a process of *consultations* and *observations*. This is achieved through the formal pre-conference, observation and post-conference phases surrounding a student lesson delivery. The PTs have been trained in this process, which is part of the much larger formal teaching practice requirements imposed upon the project by the external examiners.

The five components which have been outlined above are the formal contacts that fulfil the student distance education needs. Crucial to the operation of these components at the district level are the overseeing and administrative functions of the three regional administration offices who are appropriately linked to the project headquarters as well as the district field personnel (see Figures 1 and 2 above). However, it appears, as the programme develops, that
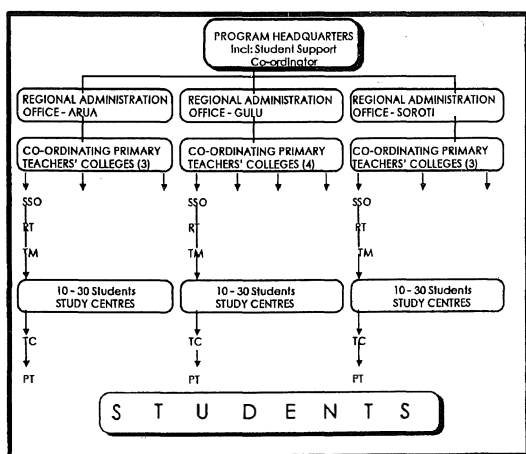
these, in themselves, are insufficient.

Figure 2. The NITEP Student Support System.

Over the months, in the implementation process of the programme, a number of more *informal contacts* between the field-based support staff and the students have developed. These include:

- a visit by a support staff to the student, at his or her school or home

  if the student is absent from a bi-monthly tutorial the tutor or SSO will move on a bicycle or motorcycle, or even on foot – up to 60km, over rough roads, and through garden tracks, in sometimes very wet and muddy, or extremely hot conditions – risking things like a bicycle breakdown, land mines and other road barriers–

- a visit by a support staff to an informal study group

  – which will be taking place probably under a mango tree, with students seated on the ground, and being watched, and probably distracted, by a large number of small village children –

- students visiting support staff

  – and sharing problems, such as – the in-laws have taken my wife away, what should I do? – I have raised most of the money needed to purchase a paraffin study lamp, but I need a final, small amount. What do you advise? – my brother has just died from AIDS. I will be unable to attend

the next tutorial, or submit my TN assignment. What should I do? – My sister's dowry is being paid this weekend. I would like you, my tutor to come and attend the celebrations –

– the visit may occur spontaneously on a village road; or at the house of the support staff; or even at the village marua or drinking place – (marua is a local drink brewed from millet flour.)

The students studying on the NITEP distance education programme face all of the usual difficulties of the distance learner, whether that be in Africa, New Zealand or elsewhere. However, because our students lack the basic communication facilitating tools, like transport (bicycles), postal services, telephones and radios, a dimension is added which makes the student support system even more important.

A student in a remote, and sometimes inaccessible location (especially during the wet season), who receives a visitor, whether impromptu or planned, feels deeply cared for. In a distance education programme there is a strong correlation between care and learner motivation. The NITEP student who receives such informal visits becomes stimulated, motivated and his or her work focus is re-defined. The distance learner thus becomes encouraged toward the achievement of his or her learning outcomes. The perception is held by those administering the field-based student support system that a strong correlation exists between contact and student motivation and stimulus.

Study excuses given are generally reasonable and acceptable. These range from having no time to a lack of money to buy paraffin fuel for the lamp. Whether these are true or not (and in most cases they are), the fundamental fact is that if the modules and supplementary materials are not read little learning occurs and the project objective of improving the quality of primary education in this disadvantaged region is threatened. So the more frequent and informal contacts a student has the more determined and motivated s/he feels. These contacts propel the desire, on the part of the student, to achieve even

higher. These contacts therefore promote the confidence required to proceed, the allaying of fears, the sense of belonging and being cared for, despite the difficulties and isolation, improved study skills and understanding of learning material through advice received.

– a local, Acholi, proverb has it that by staying close to the anthill the Duiker (animal) becomes to look like the anthill itself – meaning that by promoting contact a model (of success) is provided for emulation –

'YIELDING FRUIT'

To us, in NITEP, these informal contacts have yielded fruit by serving the hidden needs of the students that it, the showing that someone cares, and that the learner has the support of others. A student who has received such frequent informal contacts once said

'– I have no problems with my studies. Everything is going on well. I have finished reading all of my new modules and I have just started on the process of re-reading the earlier modules – and I am making summary notes from each of them –'

Such a student is highly motivated and is definitely enjoying his studies.

Another student who lives close to the project headquarters and frequently pays visits to its staff, has said:

'– I have now bought a new bicycle and I find it easier to move from my school to the Study Centre – and to the place where we have our own little study group meetings –'

Again, such a student has developed a sense of belonging and a high level of commitment to his studies.

There is now enough anecdotal evidence to suggest that the more informal support services and care the student receives in his/her studies the more committed the student is toward the study and achievement of terminal objectives. The two examples of our students described above come from one district where the support staff are caring and feel concerned about the students' progress.

THE CARING STUDENT SUPPORT OFFICER (SSO)

In the context of the NITEP programme the desirable qualities of a caring field officer includes the following: one who rises early and moves to remote locations in order to monitor student activities, progress and difficulties. S/he will be able to *empathise* with the students in their various circumstances; one who visits the students frequently and in all conditions; one who works enthusiastically – with energy, self motivation, commitment – and over long hours without demanding high monetary gain; and one who is warm and dedicated to the students' struggle – s/he knows the students by name, and each of their learning contexts. However, we also have cases of support staff who are uncaring and feel unconcerned about the distance learners' needs. In such districts the vital informal contacts between the students and support staff have not developed. The consequence of this has been a feeling of isolation on the part of the student (the distance learner) and a significant loss of interest and motivation in studies. This eventually leads to attrition.

THE EFFECTS OF THE 'CULTURE OF CARE'

In one district, 'A', the 'culture of care' has become highly developed, with significant, on-going and informal support contacts being developed alongside the formal contacts. In contrast, in adjacent district 'B', no informal contact (or 'culture of care') has developed. However, the formal support system is operating at a minimal, adequate level. The figures below illustrate the programme performance results in these two districts, at the halfway point in the three-year programmes.

The data suggest that students in District 'A' are more committed to the programme of study. There are no cultural, social, demographic, economic or educational reasons to believe that there should be a wide variance of results in these two adjacent districts. If we were to explain the differing phenomena in the two districts in an operational way, it would be that the field officer overseeing the student welfare

(the SSO) in District A is clearly more diligent, energetic and mobile in his approach toward contacting students. The motorcycle, which has been provided to these professionals in each district, is moving earlier and more frequently in district A, as the SSO visits students and tutors listening to problems, advising them on studies and tutoring, and linking them with other options to assist them to achieve (that is, a higher level of care.) Above all the SSO is both pro-active, in searching for clues and evidence of problems and needs, and reactive, in his approach to his support work. Meanwhile the reverse is happening in district B where the SSO (and, as a consequence, most of his field-tutors) makes few attempts to maintain contacts with his students and tutors.

Table 1: Programme results at the half-way point

Indicators	District A	District B
Initial student number	221	384
Current student number	210	334
Change in student number (percent)	-5	-13
Percent attending residential at the program mid-way point	99	90
Student drop-outs percent explained	73	49
Percent of students submitting latest tutor-marked assignment	97	93
Overall mean of mid-program exam results	38	31
Student Support-'Caring' rating	High	Low

THE 'INFECTIOUS' ROLE OF THE STUDENT SUPPORT OFFICER

Given the vast area that our project covers and the very poor means of communication, it would be difficult for one field officer to reach all students and tutors scattered over the district, with the one available motorcycle. The SSO's level of care and concern needs to be passed on to the field tutors, especially the tutor counsellors and personal tutors. Where that has happened (as in District 'A') the infectious 'culture of care' has become multi-dimensional and multi-levelled. It is manifested in informal contacts between tutors and students, among tutors, and among students, all of which results in commitment and an enhanced quality of teaching and learning. This is happening in District 'A', but not in District 'B'. An informally positive, infectious SSO provides a direct impact on the level of care

operating at the district level. This, in turn, appears to be crucial to stimulating success in the learning outcomes and, therefore, the distance education project objectives.

CONCLUSION

From experience in our project location it appears that where the formal components of the student support system are working this is not, in itself, enough to ensure active participation in the learning process and success with the learning objectives. However, if these are working alongside a vibrant informal network of contacts, learning and learner-motivation are much enhanced. This is dependent upon the infectious vitality and energy of the field administrators concerned.

The culture of distance learning is new for Uganda. The learner is demanding, in an African sense, a feeling of 'brotherhood' from his distance teachers the modules, and the face-to-face field tutors. This brotherhood is best provided by the informal contacts in a spirit of spontaneity, energy and humour.

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