

Experimenting technology-mediate distance education (TechMODE) for strengthening young professionals training in ESD

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THE CONTEXT

The importance of an informed citizenry in achieving sustainable development has been recognized, and therefore many countries have given importance to ESD. With the declaration of 2005-2014 as the UN Decade of ESD this has been stressed at the highest international level.

However, while recognition of the importance of ESD has been growing, it is a fact that there has not been commensurate development of human resources to handle this task. There are few ESD training opportunities that exist in the developed world and are not relevant for developing countries. Hence, it is essential to have courses tailor-made for the needs of environmental educators in this region. The UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development is a particularly opportune time to focus on this, and this project aims to address this need.

The task of ESD is enormous, as it needs to reach out to each and every citizen. ESD is different from other kinds of education in that educators not only aim to create awareness and transfer knowledge, but also to change attitudes, teach skills, and ultimately, empower stakeholders to take decisions and to act. Hence, ESD is a specialized task, calling for specialized training—training in reaching out to a large number of different target groups with fairly complex messages; training in participatory ways of communicating with people; training in empowering, enabling and motivating people to act. While the recognition of the importance of ESD has been growing, it is a fact that there has not been the necessary growth in terms of human resources to handle this task.

There are few courses or training programmes to develop the skills and capacities of environmental educators. This is true in the context of the opportunities tailor-made for such professionals working in developing countries, including in the Asia-Pacific region. Since ESD has to be very locale-specific to be effective, the few courses offered in the developed world are not really useful for these countries—in terms of the environmental issues they discuss, the solutions they offer or even the education and communication methods, technologies and approaches they suggest. Hence, it is essential to have courses tailor-made for the needs of environmental educators in this region.

It was with the above mentioned rationale, that the Centre for Environment Education, in partnership with IUCN, WWF International, UNEP and UNESCO used to offer an annual international Training programme in Education and Communication for SD (TECSD), an three-month residential in-service training programme with focus on young ESD practitioners in the developing world. This training programme, called the international

Training programme in Education and Communication for Sustainable Development (TECSD), was designed for young and mid-term professionals from developing countries working. This regional capacity building initiative was launched by CEE India in 1993.

THE CHANGING TIMES

Given that the understanding of and concepts in the fields of study of environment and development has changed much largely over the last decade and that SD and thus ESD would continue to be a very dynamic and contested discipline, it was required that CEE reviewed its programme in this context. CEE.

Further, with the changing concept of both the accelerated demand for in-service training, and the concept of 'time', the challenge for CEE has been how to bring in principles of good quality education into in-service training without necessarily having professionals take off from work for long to come to the 'training room'. In the context of such recent developments in SD and in-service training, CEE felt the need to re-orient its programme to address education and communication aspects of SD—Climate Change concerns, and Sustainable Waste Management, Disaster Preparedness.

Given the above context CEE, with support from the Commonwealth of Learning, is reviewing this decade old International Training Programme in Education and Communication for Sustainable Development.

EXPERIMENTING Tech-MODE

The process of review and reorientation is *an experiment to understand the role and significance of technology-mediated distance in ensuring good support to adult and young learners* so as to make learning resources compatible to the changing training needs of young professionals. While the advantages of using technology mediated delivery models are many:

- Online courses help in-service professionals to interact with each other through facilities like bulletin boards, chat rooms and mailing lists. Since ESD is about peer learning, on-line programmes can help facilitate ESD by enhancing learner's knowledge and skills through peer learning
- Online courses promote life-long learning. ESD is life-long education and hence diminishing of boundaries such as age, time and geographical presence is critical for good ESD. On-line education thus becomes relevant.
- Online programmes can strengthen the 'transfer of learning', which is perhaps the most challenging part of any in-service training programme. Most of the time, most of what we learn in a course is forgotten within a week or two of the end of classes or is not found to work in our context/job situation. Having that spark of interest and knowing how to find information online insures that your new learning is always available to you. Internet can developed the skills to find information, digest it, synthesize it and formulate an answer to any question that comes your way.

- Online courses are convenient; they are available for all 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Learners can get announcements, access notes, review assignments, take practice quizzes, discuss questions, and chat with fellow learner and study any time you want. Other than certain due dates, you make your own schedule for completing the requirements of the course.
- Online courses offer flexibility. Most professionals do not have time from their busy schedule and work so such courses help them immensely. They can study at their convenient time and place.
- Online courses are easy to update, modify and change, thus there is always room for improvement in the programme based on the needs and demand of the learners.

It is yet critical to ensure that use of TechMODE is supportive and effective in reaching the goals that a trainer has carved for her effort.

SOME LEARNINGS AND INSIGHTS

While TechMODE has immense potential in bridging the big gaps in in-service and young professionals training in today's world, it is important that TechMODE:

- Does not drive the training content and methodology but supports it
- Ensures that training reaches from an 'individual professional to her institution'; thus enables and supports institutional change
- Makes on-the-job training truly a work-place based training allowing young trainees to be able to experiment with the newer knowledge and skills and gained and contextualize the same to their work context
- Makes in-service training learner-controlled and not mere learner-centred
- Provides technology platforms for young professionals to come back and share their 'expertise' derived from their work experience, thus feeding back to the training content and learnings
- Enables sharing and learning across boundaries, different countries, cultures and time zones
- Supports 'Praxis', i.e. technological solutions to training delivery must ensure that 'ground-level work and practice' feeds into deriving newer learnings and theories
- Makes training and in-service training multi-accessed and diverse
- Makes the training more customized for each of the young professional and her needs and context
- Over and above supports the goals of training set forth and not have them adjusted to merely suit the technological advancements available in today's world.

THE NEW PROGRAMME

The new programme is being designed to be primarily targeted towards young professionals—young professionals working in the field of Environment and Development. Since they are involved in making various levels of decision-making, innovating within the development work; implementing newer ways of supporting and capacity building communities; experimenting with media for creating newer theories

and pedagogical ideas for making education and communication effective; *the young professionals would be working in a pluralistic, diverse and fluid environment. It thus becomes critical that that they connect to people of various cultures. They are also the strong agents in the society who are the drivers to achieving all the 8 MDG's.*

“Young people are empowered when they acknowledge that they have or can create choices in life, are aware of implications of these choices, make an informed decision freely, take action based on that decision and accept responsibility for the consequences of those actions.”

the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment.

THE OLD PROGRAMME

The Course aims to expose participants to understand the larger framework and context of ESD through sharing of experiences across the region and to open up various options and approaches for ESD. Emphasis is on hands-on experiential learning through group and individual projects on developing ESD strategies, action plans, resource materials, etc.

Skill development is a particular focus. This includes skills in developing educational material, communicating with various groups, etc. Considering that the course is for in-service professionals, all of whom, besides being educators are also project managers, the course has a module on Project management also. Each participant puts her/his learnings through implementing ESD projects in their countries. This is an integral part of the Course.

The goals were: (1) To develop an in-service training programme to equip educators in the Asia-Pacific region to effectively carry out Education for Sustainable Development in their countries; (2) To train at least 8-10 key educators from the developing countries every year, eventually building a cadre of educators for SD in the region, who would help to create a more active and informed citizenry.

Till date, 88 professionals from 18 countries have been under this initiative.

STAKEHOLDERS

The participants are in-service professionals who are working or have the potential to implement and/or influence Education for Sustainable Development initiatives in their countries. Most of them have at least 3-5 years experience in Education/Environment/Environment/SD Education. Participants may come from Government Ministries, from academia, from education and training institutions, from NGOs, from National Parks, Zoos, etc., and reflect a variety of backgrounds and work responsibilities. Such a diversity of backgrounds helps to bring in multiple perspectives into the training programme, which enriches the learnings.

The Course Curriculum

The 3 month course aims to provide participants an overview of environmental issues in the region, and will stress how education and communication strategies and techniques can be designed and implemented to help in effective environmental management. Through the Course, participants acquire knowledge and skills in conceptualizing, planning, implementing and evaluating ESD projects. The Course content will be dealt with through 5 modules:

- **Basics of Ecology and Global/Regional Environmental Issues**

This module discusses basic ecological concepts as well as key environment-development issues of particular relevance to the region.

- **Fundamentals of Sustainable Development**

This module discusses the concept, principles and experiences in sustainable development. It also explores the linkages of environment and development with politics, population, law, trade, etc. The module also discusses the philosophy and principles related to ESD.

- **Educating and Communicating for SD: Methods and Strategies**

This core module involves sharing of experiences and concepts related to the planning, implementation and evaluation of sustainable development related education and communication projects for various target groups (working in schools, in higher education institutions; working with communities, industries, youth; utilizing media for ESD, etc.). The module helps participants develop knowledge and skills of education and communication methodology and techniques. The module provides hands-on experiences in developing strategies and methods for education for sustainable development.

- **Resources for ESD**

This module introduces the participants to a variety of resources which can be used for SD education and discusses the contextual applications of different media. The focus of the module is NOT to make educators expert in various media, but the idea is to OREINT educators to the advantages and limitations of the various media tools in communicating for SD. As part of this module, the participants go through hands-on experiences (of making a video, puppet shows, developing exhibitions, etc.) aimed at providing them with skills to select and develop some important resources related to EE.

- **Project Management and Capacity Building**

This module discusses the preparation of project proposals and budgets. It also discusses the tools used for project management including monitoring and evaluation (LFA, RBM, etc.). Further, workshops on a number of other skills required by a project manager like leadership, interpersonal, time management, etc. are conducted as part of this module. The module introduces the participants to principles of participatory training (training of trainers) and capacity building. The module includes discussions on significance of international and regional networking, collaborations, information servicing, etc. for facilitating SD.

The Course Structure

The three month residential training programme is offered annually. Participants are in-service professionals who are working or have potential to implement and/or influence Education for Sustainable Development in their country. The teaching-learning methodologies range from interactive classroom sessions, games and activities, lectures, case discussions, group discussions etc. to media workshops. Group work, short-term assignments and projects form an integral part of the Course. A number of field trips, as a part of the coursework, are organized to schools, rural development projects, urban community projects, national park and wildlife management projects, clean industries, etc. There are also exposure visits to NGOs, educational and resource institutions, etc.

The Course-end Project

Each participant, before coming to attend the course, is required to submit a proposal outlining an ESD project which s/he would like to implement within six months of return to the parent organization. To ensure that the project objectives are in line with the larger goals of the parent organization and that the candidate is provided the necessary support to implement the project by the parent organization, it is required that the parent organization approves the project idea. During the three months of Course duration, each participant refines the project proposal under the guidance of a CEE faculty member who has experience in a related field. Submission of a satisfactory project report in time is necessary for successful completion of the Course. The Course-end project serves dual purpose—transfer of learning to the participants' work context and providing scope for 'individual learning' within the larger group training process.