

MATE (I) Story

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Introduction

Most countries give priority to teacher education, yet professional development of teacher educators who develop teachers is left as a responsibility of teacher educators themselves. It is rarely that teacher educators get the opportunity to update their knowledge or to acquire needed skills to perform effectively as teacher educators. In Sri Lanka, teacher educators have access mainly to research degree programs. To address this unmet demand, in 2000, the Department of Education of the Faculty of Education, Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) launched a professional development program, the Master of Arts in Teacher Education (MATE) program, especially designed for teacher educators in the country.

Rationale for a Masters Program for Teacher Educators

In 1996, the World Bank under its Teacher Education and Teacher Development Project provided opportunities for the development of teachers and teacher educators. The Open University of Sri Lanka stepped into fulfill the above-mentioned national need and developed the Master of Arts in Teacher Education (MATE) program with financial assistance from the World Bank. The general aim of the MATE Program was the enhancement of the professional competence of personnel engaged in teacher education.

Local and International Collaboration

The impetus for developing the MATE (International) Program emanated from a suggestion made by the President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka to offer a few scholarships to teacher educators to follow the MATE Program. As a result of this initiative, discussions were held in December, 2002, with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), and the need to improve the quality of the Program to satisfy the needs of an overseas clientele was identified.

A series of meetings and workshops held from 2003 to 2004, generously sponsored by the COL, represented intense collaboration between local and international teacher educators. In the Experts' Meeting on Internationalizing the Program (February, 2003) experts from India, Bangladesh and Australia participated with senior academics from the University of Colombo and the Open University focusing mainly on program curriculum.

The radical shift in the orientation of the Program from a traditional knowledge-focused one to a practitioner-oriented program took place at the second workshop, the Advanced Training Workshop on Instructional Design (August, 2003) where Professor Som Naidu of University of Melbourne was the facilitator.

The Workshop succeeded in orienting the Sri Lankan academics that had expertise and experience in developing and coordinating conventional teacher education program to learner-centered and practitioner-centered novel approaches and more importantly in convincing them of the strengths of the new instructional designs. The Workshop, though limited to five days, developed close rapport and initiated strong long-lasting bonds among the participants which laid the solid foundation for the development of the program.

A subsequent workshop held in August 2004 attended to the final editing of all relevant materials - the Program Brochure, the Study Guide, the Essential and Additional Readings - the core materials for

the Program. Review of learning materials was carried out by experts from Australia, India, and Singapore. This quality assurance initiative which had a direct impact on the credibility of the Program was effected through the generous facilitation by COL.

Program structure

The goal of the MATE (I) program is to develop among teacher educators competencies and practices in relation to:

- teaching and learning strategies, including assessment of learning outcomes,
- design, development and evaluation of curricula and curriculum related areas
- design, development and use of educational technologies in teaching and learning
- teaching as a profession and the professional roles and responsibilities of teachers
- management and leadership in and related educational activities
- research and evaluation of teaching, learning ,and related educational activities

To achieve the above, the program was structured into six courses and a portfolio project, with the minimum duration of one and a half years, to be implemented in three, six-month semesters.

The program effectively used a mixed mode delivery where print, face-to-face contact sessions, electronic communication and additional online and multimedia resources are integrated. Print media was selected as the main technology as it is the most accessible form to be used by students, in all parts of the country. A complete instructional package included a Program Handbook, Study Guide and Resource Pack containing the Essential and Additional Readings and multimedia.

Program Implementation

After two years of careful design and development of the MATE-I Program, the next challenge awaiting the Program Team was its implementation. A team approach was adopted throughout implementation. The program team including seven course teams worked collaboratively in implementing this unique program. It was decided to initially implement with Sri Lankan teacher educators as a pilot study, and later to establish links with overseas educational institutions to offer the program internationally.

The soft launch of the program was conducted in November, 2004, with the participation of Sir John Daniel, CEO of COL as the Chief Guest, and the Secretary of Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka, as the Guest of Honor, and other international and local experts from the field of teacher education. The study program commenced in February 2005, with a small group of Sri Lankan teacher educators. The implementation of the pilot program was closely monitored and evaluated continuously, for further improvement.

Organization of program implementation

Program implementation was organized in several phases. Selection of students to the pilot study and enrolling them was the initial step. As MATE-I is a Masters level professional development program developed specifically for practicing teacher educators, specific entry criteria which requires either a Post Graduate Diploma in Education with a basic degree, or Bachelor of Education Degree. Also they all had to be practicing teacher educators. . This requirement was also essential, due to the nature of this practitioner-oriented program in which all the learning and assessment activities are closely linked with their day-to-day professional practices. The first cohort of students selected for the pilot program, consisted of Sri Lankan teacher educators from different institutions representing all the provinces of the country

As MATE (I) is a totally learner-centred program offered using ODL methods, to a target group who are mature students and full-time employed professionals, it was crucial that adequate learner support is built into the course design. This need was carefully addressed in the design and

development process of the courses, and was applied during the implementation stage. It was essential that being distant learners the students use ODL methods in their learning. Due to the action-oriented nature of the program objectives, the learners are compelled to engage in a number of self-initiated learning activities, facilitated by the learning environment conducive for distance learning. However to engage in this self-regulated learning approach students require continuous support and facilitation by the instructors

Implementation methods

The selected applicants were interviewed to check their eligibility to enroll in the program.

As the students were mostly used to the conventional mode of study, mainly on face-to-face lectures, it was essential to orient them to the new approach and an Orientation Session was held to provide awareness, guidance and advise to students on the distance study mode, the new learning approach-scenario-based learning (SBL), and the assessment criteria.

The students registered in the program were provided with the distance education materials comprising of a Program Handbook, a Study Guide and a Resource Pack consisting of Essential Readings and Multimedia learning materials. The general aim was to support the distant learners of this program, through provision of clear guidelines and supportive learning materials to enhance their learning.

At the commencement of each Semester, one-day orientation sessions were conducted by specific course teams, to provide initial guidance on each course. These were organized especially to give students a clear idea of how to progress through each course consisting of learning scenarios, learning activities and assessment tasks, according to a detailed study schedule provided in the Study Guide which specifies week-to-week activities students need to perform, to achieve the specified learning outcomes of each course.

The courses were designed in such a way that due recognition is accorded to prior learning and experience of learners. The SBL approach adopted in the program allows building up on their existing competencies already acquired through prior professional development. For example, prior knowledge on methods of teaching and aids to teaching and learning is essential to engage in the learning activities of the course Teacher Educator as an Educational Technologist, where they have to design and develop a technology-enhanced learning material. Also, their prior experiences gained as teachers and teacher educators are also needed to successfully engage in the learning activities.

A limited number of interactive contact sessions - day schools and workshops, scheduled appropriately in each course, were held considering students' need for tutor facilitation and peer interactions. Face-to-face day schools sessions provided an opportunity for students to meet staff and peers and discuss about course-related issues.

Inter-personal communication and team work during the learning process was encouraged and enhanced through various means. The interactive contact sessions in most of the courses required students to present their work, and obtain peer feedback resulting in group discussions facilitated by staff. These sessions also provided an opportunity for students to have team discussions on common issues faced in the learning process and how to manage those and thus enabled students to share their experiences with the peers.

In addition, skill-development workshops which provided students with hands-on experience on using new technology such as e-learning and multimedia development were also conducted. These were 3-4 day workshop sessions, where students received expert support and guidance in using and applying new technology, specifically for the course, "Teacher Educator as an Educational Technologist".

Students could communicate with the academic staff via phone, mail, or e-mail. OUSL main campus, regional and study center support with library, computer and Internet facilities. In addition to print materials and multimedia resources together with contact sessions which comprised the major forms of student support, local study center support with library, computer and Internet facilities were also provided. Electronic media such as web pages on program information, on-line provision for tutor support and assignment submission, and an online discussion forum to facilitate student interactions were also provided. Especially, in the course, "Teacher Educator as an Educational Technologist", students were encouraged to use a Learning Management System, Manhattan and later, Moodle. This facility enabled students to communicate with staff, collaborate with peers and submit their assignments. Online discussions were linked with their assignments, and 5% of the assignment mark was awarded to students who actively participated in these discussions to motivate them.

In addition to the above, the program coordinators maintained close links with the students through various mechanisms such as monthly student notices and time tables sent by post, or posted to the Virtual Class and their progress was monitored. Students were encouraged to communicate with coordinators through e-mail and online discussion forum, and immediate responses were sent to their queries. Especially, the online discussion fora of the course ESP 2242 were very successful in facilitating inter-personal communication and team work

There is no final written examination in this program and the compulsory assignments submitted were assessed by two examiners and detailed feedback was given for students via detailed comment sheets specially designed for this task. The purpose of assignments was not only to assess the student performance, but also to support students' learning process through continuous feedback.

Evaluation

The program has been continuously evaluated by the Course Team through staff and student feedback during implementation. The evaluation focused on finding out the challenges faced by students as well as academic staff in adopting this new approach. Feedback was obtained via formal questionnaires on staff experiences, student experiences, student reflections in Learning Portfolios, interviews with lecturers, focus group discussions with students and informal observations. Several evaluation workshops with the facilitation of an International expert were also conducted during the pilot phase. Further, evaluations on the impact of the online learning environment and challenges faced by students who were novices to online learning were also conducted.

The findings revealed this novel program to be very challenging and demanding for staff as well as students. It was rewarding to observe that, despite many issues faced, the learners were increasingly engaging in collaborative, reflective and self-regulated learning. Especially for the isolated distance learners, where frequent student interaction is limited, facilitation of collaboration via carefully designed learning activities, and online support was very useful. While learning together about the SBL approach was novel to all learners, a sense of achievement is observed to be developing among the learners, as a group (Karunanayaka et al., 2005a, Karunanayaka et al., 2005b; Naidu et al., 2005)

Especially the online learning environment in ESP 2242, designed to support students to interact with the subject matter content, with each other and with the instructor, had made a great impact on their learning. The requirement to engage in collaborative learning activities led to more interactions among students and enhanced knowledge construction through a process of negotiating meanings with others, supporting the social-constructivist view of learning. Although they faced certain challenges such as coping with the technology, time constraints and Internet access problems, a sense of achievement was experienced once the activities were completed. The social presence of peers and instructor in the virtual class was crucial in increasing students' perceived feelings of connection with others. It promoted the development of a learning community where learners shared common interests and worked together towards a common goal (Karunanayaka, 2006).

Challenges Faced and Achievements

The development of the MATE (International) Program was a daunting challenge undertaken, by the Department of Education of the OUSL. The most challenging task, perhaps, was to achieve the required paradigm shift in university academics from a transmission teaching-learning culture to a transactional culture where students' talents, competencies, experiences and potential are given due recognition and the students are accepted as active in the teaching-learning process. Evaluations of the implementation of curriculum reforms at all levels of formal education introduced during the last ten years (Gunawardena et al, 2002; Gunawardena and Lekamge, 2003; Perera et al, 2003) have indicated that the stumbling block appears to be the unwillingness and lack of readiness of teachers to change the process of education. The change has to occur in teacher educators before it could be achieved in teachers.

A second challenge was the retirement of able coordinators of the Program and other senior academics that affected its smooth development especially in a context where existing staff could not be released from their normal academic activities in other programs. This issue was aggravated by the fact the Program was being developed and delivered in English. It was therefore necessary to identify academics who had both subject expertise and excellent writing skills in English. The medium continued as an issue as the number of teacher educators with English proficiency to follow the Program is low and therefore per student cost of delivery soars up. Recently the Faculty decided to merge the original MATE Program with the MATE (International) Program and offer it in all three national languages.

Another challenge was to offer the Program, to make it truly international, in other countries. The most promising venues for the Program appeared to be South Asia and East Africa as the levels of economic development and the issues faced in education and teacher education were, to a large extent, similar. Yet financial policies that bind universities to enrolling overseas students are require the latter to pay higher fees than local students. Being developing countries they cannot consider purchasing the materials to offer on their own. Moreover there appears to be reluctance among foreign universities to become partners for this Program perhaps because they perceive an outside institution as a threat. The University is now considering making the materials of the program available as Open Source materials

Concluding Remarks

The Faculty of Education was able to manage the challenges mentioned before, and to launch the Program by February 2006 as envisaged. The experience of participating in development of the MATE (International) Program has been rewarding and invaluable to the academics who participated in the activity. They realize the sterility of training programs which make students merely accumulate knowledge and regurgitate that knowledge at examinations, especially when they are practicing teachers. In the examination-dominated system of education in Sri Lanka where the above process is replicated from primary to higher degree level, policymakers and educators are frantically seeking strategies to break the above syndrome, and the novel approach experimented here would undoubtedly be extremely valuable for implementing the envisaged changes.

It is rewarding to note that the Faculty of Education has reaped many a benefit as a result of initiating the Program. Its academic staff has accepted the need for new approaches and new instructional designs in offering courses to students, especially graduate teachers and teacher educators to empower them to take control of their learning and to stimulate them to be independent learners. The senior academics who participated in the earlier Workshops have in turn become change agents and have effectively shared their experiences with other colleagues who also contribute to the conduct of the Program now.

This transformed practitioner-oriented teacher educator program promises many dividends not only for teacher educator development but also for teacher education and general education in Sri Lanka and the neighbouring countries. The contribution made by the Commonwealth of Learning in facilitating the MATE (I) Program in identifying international experts at several points in its development, sponsoring the

meetings, workshops and reviews and above all, the commitment demonstrated by its Education Specialist, Professor Mohan Menon in actively participating in all these fora has been widely acclaimed as a key factor in the success of the Program.

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