

Learning for Development from Within and Beyond the Reef: Early Implementations of Open Distance Learning and Use of Open Educational Resources (OER) for the Teaching of English in a Small Island State

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Abstract: The following article examines the beginnings of open distance learning and use of OER by the National University of Samoa Faculty of Education to address an identified national need for more teachers and to improve their quality. It highlights related challenges in the training of teachers and how different and new modes of learning are not always immediately acceptable and effective for the learners. It also discusses different perceptions related to ODL and OER and the need for policy developments at national and institutional levels for an integrated approach that can lead to sustainability.

Keywords: Teacher Development; Open Distance Learning (ODL); Open Educational Resources (OER); Reading – English; Primary School Teachers; Post-colonial, agency

Introduction

The shortage of teachers in Samoa as well as the need to improve teacher quality propelled efforts by the National University of Samoa (NUS) to deliver courses via open and distance learning (ODL) mode. One of the initial courses prepared by two lecturers of the Faculty of Education for ODL mode was English for Primary Teachers. It was first offered on campus for a first cohort, who provided feedback to the lecturers on a regular basis throughout the 12-week semester on how they regarded the course in terms of (1) understanding more about English language and literature as primary teachers, and (2) the applicability of the course content in the classroom. In the development stages of the course it became clear that a wealth of open educational resources (OER) was available online. Whilst some resources were downloaded and integrated into the printed course content for on-campus, face to face delivery, it was also apparent that teachers could benefit more if they knew how to use their computers and phones to access such resources online and use them on a regular basis for their own professional development and classroom practice. Nevertheless, connectivity problems in Samoa continue to affect ICT-generated educational developments.

The course was divided into five units, which covered:

- (i) Phonetics and phonemic awareness
- (ii) Dictionary skills
- (iii) English grammar
- (iv) Creative writing
- (v) Children's Literature.



English is a second language to local Samoans and, therefore, a basic linguistic background to the sounds of English and how they are produced was deemed essential. An introduction to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) necessitated an early engagement with an English dictionary which had been used mainly for meanings and spelling. With IPA awareness, the significance of the phonetic representations of words and phonemic distinctions became highlighted and more meaningful. Although most, if not all, teacher trainees had learnt English in school, the clarifications of grammatical rules were still very much needed for themselves and for the purposes of teaching. This unit dovetailed into creative writing for teachers with a focus on writing creative and grammatically correct texts for children, which would, in turn, encourage children to speak and write in an imaginative and grammatically correct way. The last unit for the course required extensive reading of children's literature, which included stories, poetry, songs, nursery rhymes and other language compositions that would be effective resources for children learning how to speak, write and communicate in English. The wide range of reading materials was made available from week one with the requirement of keeping a journal to record reading texts and subsequent reflections. The underlying motive for making available these primary level reading materials was to familiarise and engage teacher trainees with resources they would later use in the classroom. Providing an understanding and appreciation of such 'texts' was intended to encourage and secure them also as committed readers. An investigation into English Literacy skills at primary schools in Samoa (Tone-Schuster, Ah Hoy-Wright, Vaafusuaga, Kolone-Collins, Pausisi, & Lauina, 2015) concluded that teachers' lack of knowledge and skills to teach reading, together with limited resources, impacted negatively on children's literacy levels. Many teachers were not conscientious readers and did not engage with reading resources, therefore, they did not impart a love of reading nor did they create appealing activities to motivate students to learn and excel in reading. Therefore, to inundate the teachers with primary level reading material from the beginning to the end of the course was also motivated by knowledge of a South Pacific book flood project conducted in Fiji (Elley & Manghubai, 1983:55), where school children were provided consistently with numerous high-interest story books in the English language over a set period of time. After the first year the results clearly showed great improvement in word recognition and reading comprehension and, into the second year, further advancements in oral and written skills in English and other subjects were demonstrated.

Although the Faculty of Education course catered to adults, the objective was the same; to ensure that reading and engaging with the books and material of the course would also have a positive effect on students who were also teacher trainees. Familiarity with and enjoyment of the reading material motivated the creation of further learning activities and imparted positive feelings and attitudes associated with reading and learning English in the classroom. Moreover, some also stated that they had not had this kind of extensive reading coverage in their primary school experience, or that many more books and stories had emerged over the years which they were not aware of so this was an opportunity to remedy 'a few gaps'. Constant exposure to and engagement with high-interest material relevant for the classroom also reinforced not only reading competence but also writing, speaking, correct sentence structures, and the accumulation of vocabulary in English. As also indicated by Elley and Mangubhai (1983), many instances of and approaches to learning English as a second language were "planned, restricted, gradual and largely artificial." It was also noted that many teachers in primary schools in Fiji and the South Pacific have an imperfect mastery of the English language and, therefore, frequently provide poor models of English for their pupils. NUS teacher

trainees therefore realised that much of the mundane, traditional, rote learning of English grammar, which many of them had experienced in primary school, could instead be absorbed and internalised more enjoyably by Samoan children in their classrooms through reading appropriate local and overseas books in English, together with relevant interactive activities including songs, plays, poems, nursery rhymes tongue twisters and the like. Moreover there was also opportunity to overlap the content, themes and vocabulary of reading materials with other subjects in the curriculum, such as math, social studies and science. For example, universal favourites, such as Eric Carle's "The Very Hungry Caterpillar", covered aspects of nutrition, growth, time and change, in the process of learning how to read. Various local legends, folk stories, fairy tales, books for young people, and modern short stories, often found in school journals and other compilations, provided insights into different cultural concepts and universal values from current locations, other time periods and faraway places.

Of the first cohort for this course delivered on campus, 73 out of 87 students successfully completed. Feedback confirmed enjoyment of the course in general and the usefulness of materials for classroom teaching contributed to ease of learning. A desire to access and acquire more reading material was highlighted and, because hard copies were not readily available, further lists of relevant websites with OER were provided. However, connectivity problems and hardware costs continue to be a challenge in Samoa and this was also evident in course delivery to the second cohort through ODL.

Open and Distance Learning

Training and experience from the Virtual University of the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) capacity building workshops proved useful in developing the ODL materials for the same course. Mindful of local connectivity problems; materials for the course were loaded by the lecturers onto flash drives together with pre-recorded videos of introduction and key lectures. A course book was also printed as backup but without all the resources and content in the flash drive – particularly the downloaded OER. The wealth of available and relevant OER was most appreciated in the compilation of course materials and confirmed the aspect of reduced cost through digital access. Most of the online children's books, stories and relevant reading, together with teaching and learning materials, could be downloaded. Audio-visual broadcasts of storytelling, songs as well as English sounds articulation exercises and other aspects of grammar were also readily available. With copyright permission, e-copies of children's stories and other material written by local authors were also included on the flash drive.

Because this cohort was located on another island away from the university; communication was facilitated by e-mail, phone and Facebook pages, depending on individual student's capabilities and access to various communication devices. Periodic on-island visits were also facilitated by the lecturers for face-to-face consultations, repeat lectures and activities as requested. Various problems were identified and discussed during these face-to-face sessions. Whilst the course material needed was all on the flash drives some students had no computers, and some had no access to the *Talanoa* and other computer centres of their respective villages to communicate online to lecturers. Some had no phones for texting, calling or using other communication applications for instant messaging. Some schools had computer labs and connectivity which assisted immensely whilst other schools did not. Others found the new mode of learning difficult as they could not always 'get away' from everyday commitments for independent study. Moreover, they felt a sense of isolation by not having regular

on-site classes together with the rest of the class. The amount of reading required was also acknowledged as a challenge. Reading skills were posed as a barrier for completion and success. This situation is common, as also noted by Bertram (2006) whose case study into teachers' reading competencies in South Africa revealed that, whilst the ODL mode opened up access for full-time teachers living far away from the university, 'their weak reading competences and inability to manage independent learning demands' did not pave the way for success. Others also lamented that there ought to be more local Samoan material in English which they could connect with more readily

English and Imported Learning Materials

Concerns have been expressed in relation to the dominance of Western material online, including, for example, easy and inexpensive access to MOOCs, which Altbach (2014) warns could inhibit the emergence of local academic culture, content and courses specially tailored for national audiences. OER initiatives have also been criticised for promoting one-directional flows of knowledge and resources mainly from the rich north to the poor south (Glennie, Harley, Butcher, & van Wyk, 2012 in Perryman, Hemmings-Buckler, & Seal, 2014). The case of Samoa may hold similarities with other post-colonial small states and academic institutions. Although Samoa was under colonial rule for 62 years before regaining independence in 1962, the strength of its social structures and the protean nature of its social dynamism enabled the society to adapt to a wide variety of foreign influences and impacts with resilience and flexibility (Kruse Vaai, 2011). After regaining independence in 1962 a strong social and political will to strengthen traditional social structures, language and culture aimed at further reaffirmation of national identity. Alongside this was also an acute awareness of vulnerability in a world environment, which could only be addressed adequately with a strong education system. To have access into and be part of the world environment, retention of English as an international language and a compulsory second language to be formally taught from primary through to secondary school is necessary. Every milestone examination requires a pass in English and certainly this is also an entry requirement into tertiary levels of study, whether local or overseas. As a small, developing, island state, Samoa needs English to take part in the wider fora of international deliberations which can affect Samoa. The establishment of the National University in 1984 was part of Samoa's continued development on a national and international basis. The courses and programmes developed and offered are primarily for a national audience but the content aims to fulfill the vision that it be recognised regionally, internationally and internationally as a vibrant and innovative centre of excellence in Samoan studies, research, quality teaching and training across all disciplines. As a national institution it also addresses national human resource capacity building and training needs. The language of instruction and course content material is in English, except for some Samoan and other foreign language courses. Relevant local input as well as imported academic content appropriate to the aims and learning outcomes of the course and the overall aims of the university and national development plans are carefully scrutinised by the academic processes of the university. There is also a desire to be on a par as much as possible with other countries and institutions, because of student/ graduate mobility and, again, English competencies play a major part as an international language of access to knowledge and other opportunities. More important, however, is the issue of agency whereby local qualified academics and practitioners are in their own right developing course content for a particular audience, time, place and context. How they adopt, adapt, and appropriate OER reflects their own academic integrity and discernment. In addition

operating in a respectful and transparent partnership between one knowledge provider and another aligns them with professional standards and expectations.

This has also been the foundation and experience of VUSSC, whereby the collaborative development of course content using the local expertise of small states' professionals and practitioners, together with online access to OER, has resulted in multi-directional flows of knowledge. This multiplier effect where the collaborative creation of resource materials are in turn further adapted and contextualised in the respective countries within which they are used, is evidence of a growing confidence in small states to acquire skills and knowledge for such developments and to also participate in and take ownership of their own efforts and directions in learning for development. This validates the VUSSC capacity building of the small states of the Commonwealth to become active contributors to the knowledge economy and leaders in educational reform.

Conclusion

The experience of developing and compiling this English course for primary teachers for both on-campus and ODL students highlighted some important realisations. Firstly, it confirmed the possibilities of access through ODL although, admittedly, there continue to be challenges, particularly in relation to connectivity and actual orientation and preparedness of teachers to undertake this alternative mode of learning compared to traditional face-to-face. Secondly, for the lecturers involved; the actual development of the course using local materials and expertise, as well as online OER, proved that use of OER minimised the cost of learning materials and delivery for both teachers and learners. With the development of COL's Aptus or the Classroom Without Walls technological innovation, greater access by teachers and students to OER offline would also improve access even more. However, more support is required for learners in reading and working through the content of this course. and possibly others, with English language learning materials. Thirdly, the quality of learning materials for the course would always be a work in progress involving continued improvements, the academic processes of the university for verification, as well as continued professional relationships of sharing and exchanging knowledge with other experts, academics and practitioners beyond the reef. Concern about academic domination by externally developed open course materials and OER can be addressed by small states continuing to author, or co-research and co-author, learning resources which will, in due course, become OER for use by many others.

The experience of this course development and delivery further highlighted some key issues for the development of the university as well as the country. There is a need for an ICT in Education Policy to support both on-campus and distance education for NUS. Effective developments cannot be sustained by immediate, improvised responses to needs. Long-term planning and development is needed for a sustainable ODL mode, together with the use and creation of OER as the norm rather than the exception. Integrated and supportive policy environments at a national and institutional level, which take into account financial, resource and operational requirements, ensure that all actors and beneficiaries are well informed and supportive of each other to enable the learning opportunities and benefits. The experience from other countries and institutions will be helpful for Samoa as a small island nation and, as well, its national university.

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