ABSTRACT:

A study among eight unit authors of the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) reveals that though the institute has devised models to develop self-instructional materials, there is a number of inadequacies in these models. Though the OUSL as a standard has decided to adopt the Course Team Model, the authors who have developed courses for various departments do not entirely follow this model. Several reasons have been attributed for this non-compliance. The university should consider these factors and design a course development model that would suit the local environment. The current staff training practices too have certain weaknesses. Therefore, it is necessary that the university revisits the programmes that are currently available to train its unit authors in developing self-learning instruction materials. One of the main constraints that a permanent academic of the Open University of Sri Lanka has in developing lesson materials is time. As the academics are performing many different roles, including development of self-instructional materials and course material delivery, it is natural that time becomes a constraint for them. This issue must be urgently addressed so that the staff could devote time to develop quality self-learning instructional materials. A further complicating factor was that the study also revealed that the university does not yet have an instituted course revision policy, so systems should be introduced that would make sure that the course materials that are distributed to its students are revised at reasonable time intervals.

1. LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACH IN DISTANCE EDUCATION:

In order to obtain the skills and knowledge that are required to be acquired, distance learners need to become involved and motivated by the instructional materials. Therefore, distance education materials take a learner-centred approach rather than a traditional content-centred approach of textbooks. According to past research, learner-centred approaches to teaching have shown to provide learners with an opportunity to think at higher levels of cognition and make learning a more transformative experience (Marzano, 1992; McCombs & Whistler, 1997; Savoie & Hughes, 1994).

In a learner-centred approach the students and their ability to learn are primary. This means that the focus is on the process of learning rather than on the content. Thus in contrast to expecting the students to adapt to the content in the traditional content-centred approach, here the content and the teacher adapt to the students. Hence the responsibility is placed on the students to learn rather than on teachers to teach. The objective of the teacher is to facilitate student learning. However, accepting responsibility for their own learning can be difficult for students who have been exposed to learning in schools as passive listeners. “This change in role may be particularly difficult for students who come from cultures in which asking questions of
the teacher is openly discouraged and perceived as unacceptable student behaviour” (Diamond, 1997, p. ix). According to Andrews, Dekkers and Solas (1998), Ballard and Clanchy (1997) and Watkins and Biggs (1996), comparatively Asian students have difficulty in adjusting to an educational environment that is more characterised by independent learning and less instructor supervision and guidance.

However the advances in information communication technology, access to information, and the vast amount of information now available are necessitating changes in how students think about learning and applying new knowledge. In this scenario, “students will need to recognize when information is required, how to locate and retrieve information, and how to analyze and critique that information so that it becomes useful” (Grunert, 1997, p. 1).

Not only the students but the teachers too, especially teachers at distance education institutes, should rethink about the age-old belief that knowledge is attained passively by information transfer from a knowledgeable authority figure (teacher) to the learner. However, many educators still have difficulty in switching over from instructive-training style to a constructive learning perspective. One reason for this is teachers often teach as they have been taught (Gardiner, 1998).

2. IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY SELF-INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS:

One of the key elements that play an important role in constructive learning is the instructional design. Instructional design includes the ideas, plans and rules of what has to be done or could be done in order to develop instruction, that is, the explanations and assignments to promote learning and reach a learning outcome that is described in advance. (Kirschner, et al., 2002). In essence instructional design is concerned with the approach and structuring of the course material (Benyon, et al., 1997).

Success of any distance education programme is heavily dependent upon its quality of course materials (Padhi, 2004). Well designed interactive course material, either in print or electronic technology based, is the foundation for the successful teaching and learning in all the flexible learning modes (Kuruba, 2004). According to Inman et al. (1999), though the students’ attitudes about the quality of the distance education courses were influenced by several factors, overall, the quality of instructional materials was the key issue. Quality course development demands that the strategies devised must be strictly implemented if standards are to be maintained. For what is at stake is not simply institutional credibility but also the future of distance and open learning. (Kanwar, 1999).

According to Murphy (2000), distance education materials are most effective if they are written according to precise objectives. Activities should be used to help break the content into suitable learning blocks. They should encourage and motivate and enable the students to gauge their understanding and progress. Commenting on distance education material, Murphy further says that the instructions should be clear and the questions should be answerable, unless they are being used to develop critical thinking. Hartley (1994) states that the writer must keep in mind that the student is likely to be studying in isolation and the materials have to compete with many other demands on their time. Learning should be efficient, effective and fun and the writers must help make it so. The writers need to create the same interactional situation on paper using an informal friendly tone. Hartley says that the use of active voice, use of ‘we’ and ‘you’ and the use of short sentences are helpful in maintaining the friendly tone whereas unnecessarily long words and long convoluted sentences are misplaced. According to Swales (2000) good planning is essential for designing and developing effective learning material. She also states that when writing distance education material the aims and objectives must be stated clearly. The aims are the overall goals for student learning. The objectives are more specific setting out what learners
should be able to do, understand and value after completing their study. Well-designed objectives can also provide a basis for construction of items for assessment later.

3. SELF-INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS OF OUSL:

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) is the only national university in Sri Lanka that offers study programmes in the distance mode, primarily based on printed materials. The students enrolled in various study programmes of the university are expected to study the course materials given to them on their own. In most courses ‘day schools’ are conducted, usually during the weekends, to discuss the problems students may encounter while studying the self-learning course materials. These day schools are conducted by ‘day-school lecturers’, simultaneously at the various centres of the university. These day-school lecturers are drawn from both the permanent and visiting academics of the university. The students are expected to study the course materials before coming for these day schools. However, it has been observed that students who attend these day schools do not come prepared to discuss their difficulties by studying the course materials given to them but depend on the day-school lecturer to explain the course contents. However, this is practically difficult as the duration of the day schools is limited, and thus the day-school lecturer will not be able to cover the entire content in the given time. Further, it goes against the concept of the distance education mode of learning.

A number of reasons can be attributed for this student behaviour. One of the main reasons for the students’ failure to come prepared for the day schools may be that the students find it difficult to adjust to such an independent learning educational environment. Another reason could be that the quality of course materials is not adequate in fulfilling the objective of self-instructional materials.

In this context, this paper presents the findings that resulted from a study conducted among the unit authors of the Open University of Sri Lanka to determine the factors that lead to producing quality self instructional materials for distance education learners in the Sri Lankan context. It also discusses the barriers faced by the writers in designing and developing course materials in the distance mode at the Open University of Sri Lanka.

For the purpose of the study an opportunistic sample of eight writers were selected from those who wrote for three different degree programmes offered by the University. These programmes are Bachelor of Arts in English Language Teaching, Bachelor of Science in Natural Sciences and Bachelor of Industrial Studies in Apparel Production and Management. The unit authors interviewed include both permanent academics (63%) and external personnel (37%). Demographic details revealed that all these unit authors are academically qualified to write materials in their specialised fields of study, with most of them having obtained post graduate qualifications in the relevant discipline.

Data were collected by means of interviews which were carried out using an interview protocol. The questions asked by the researchers sought to collect information on the demographic details of the unit authors, the reasons for selecting the particular individual to write the corresponding study material, prior experience they have had in writing material for distance education courses, the type of training or guidelines given to them before commencing writing and the problems and barriers they were faced with when writing material. Confidentiality of the information collected was maintained by using pseudonyms when analyzing the data. Measures were taken to ensure the validity of the research by carrying out a document analysis on a sample of study materials that each of these unit authors has written. A qualitative analysis of the data collected was done to identify the factors that lead to writing good instructional material and the barriers that the unit authors face when writing course materials.
4. Unit Authors’ Opinions on Course Material Development:

All the permanent academics stated that writing course material was considered as an essential part of their work and thus whether they were trained or not, they were expected to write lesson materials. From the study it was revealed that all the permanent academics were given writing assignments soon after they joined the University. However, in the case of the external unit authors it transpired that they were asked to write material for the Open University of Sri Lanka, since they were considered as specialists in the relevant subject area.

With reference to time constraints, all the permanent academics stated that as they are expected to carry out multifaceted tasks during the working hours, which include coordination of courses, meeting students, answering the telephone, setting, posting and marking assignments etc., they find little time to concentrate on writing self instructional materials for the courses assigned to them. However, time factor was not a serious concern for the external unit authors.

As far as training or any kind of guidelines given to write material, the responses from both the internal and external unit authors were mostly similar. The answers varied as follows.

- “I was not given any training”
- “I was not given any training but I have experience in studying in the distance mode. Therefore I am familiar with the format, such as inserting Self Assessment Questions and so on”
- “I wasn’t given a training but I was given a module written in the distance education mode and I followed it”
- “I have attended a workshop on writing material but it is not sufficient and I attended this workshop shortly after I joined the Open University. Therefore I did not understand the distance education concept at that time”
- “I had discussions with the staff members in the department”
- “I was given two booklets on writing for the Open University”

Although the OUSL has produced two booklets on writing for the distance education mode namely the ‘House Style’ and ‘Bridging the Gap’, many unit authors felt that they have not made much use of the two books. Only three unit authors from the permanent academics responded positively and one of them said that the ‘House Style’ is difficult to understand.

- “I did not get any help”
- “I did not get assistance from anybody, I did not need help either but my problem was to use a suitable style for the distance education mode”
- “My seniors have helped me. They showed me the material that they have written”
- “I got help in determining the subject matter but I did not get any help in writing the material”

Most of the unit authors felt that the material written by them was not edited. However several of them felt that some revision is needed and one unit author said that, “I used extra handouts in the class to supplement what I have written”. Another unit author said that, “This goes as an experimental copy. After piloting it I made minor revisions”. An external unit author stated that “I was not involved in teaching the students. Therefore I asked the teacher who used the material whether there were any problems”. She also said that “I would like to get feedback from students so that I can do better next time”.

The external unit authors said that they did not write as a team. However many unit authors were of the opinion that the course team concept is useful since ideas can be shared and the input of a team is useful when preparing a concept map.

All the unit authors have encountered a number of barriers when writing material. The permanent academics stated that the library facilities at the OUSL are not sufficient and that latest journals and books are not available. External unit authors did not have that problem since they had access to other libraries. Another unit author mentioned that problems arise in the use of the template for the word processing package since it is out dated and also when the computers break down it is difficult to get the template reinstalled.
5. **Course Material Development Models:**

Based on this study undertaken by the authors it can be concluded that the though the Open University of Sri Lanka has developed a model for course material development, there are several shortcomings in implementing this model.

Padhi (2004) describes the various course design and development models that are practiced by the distance education institutes around the world. The Open University of Sri Lanka as a standard adopts the Course Team (CT) model. Based on this model concept, the university has developed guidelines in the form of two booklets ‘The House Style’ and ‘Bridging the Gap’. According to Padhi as this model includes representation and active involvement of different categories of experts, the quality of materials thus produced is normally high. However, one of the serious criticisms of this model is that it takes two to three years to prepare a course and therefore the cost goes up. For a university that is functioning in the third world with many financial constraints it is worthwhile to ask itself whether it is prudent to adopt a course design and development model that is comparatively costly.

The document analysis done on the materials reveals that although in most instances the house style which stipulates the layout of the course materials is adhered to, the development of the material has not been followed as per the course team model guidelines given in the “Bridging the Gap”. In many instances the course material development follows the Coordinator-Writer-Editor (CWE) model as described by Padhi (2004). Indira Gandhi National Open University and many other universities in the region follow this model. In extreme instances, the document analysis reveals that the course materials have been given to students as written by the unit authors, even without being edited by a subject specialist.

Naidu (2003) identifies ten critical characteristics as essentials for learner-centred education. Some of these characteristics that pertain to the course material development have been accommodated in the guidelines developed by the Open University of Sri Lanka for writing self instructional materials in accordance with the CT model it practices. These include learner-based model of course design and development where appropriate, development testing of the course materials through feedback from probable learners, etc. However, in practice, the instructional materials have remained mostly print-based and the prescribed guidelines have not been adhered to because of various constraints.

The single author model (CWE model) of course development is associated with simple and very flexible production which is easy to alter. According to Childs (1971) some courses are sensitive to change and therefore should be structured in a manner that change can be more easily effected. However, the one of the inadequacy of the CWE model is that it does not accommodate policy for pre-testing and post-production testing (Padhi, 2004). Another weakness of the single author model is that it leaves the entire process of course writing to individual academics (Jenkins, 1981).

Even though through this work the two models that came into prominence are the CT and CWE models, it is worthwhile for the Open University of Sri Lanka to look at the other course development models that are practised in various distance education institutes and try to develop a model or a few models that would be most suitable for the university, taking into consideration the social habits and environment of the learners, cost, time constraints, course delivery methods, availability of resource persons to write and edit the courses, and availability of course delivery resource personnel.

Padhi (2004) in her work presents eight different course development models. According to the authors, the two models (other than CT and CWE models) that are worth consideration are the Adaptation Model and the Self-Study Book Model. Adaptation model involves preparation of a document based on available resource courses. In the Self-Study Book Model an
exhaustive survey on the existing course and textbooks are undertaken by the faculty, and based on that a detailed course outline is developed. If these models are pursued, the need for the academics to write brand new materials would be eliminated and they would only be required to write and edit few pages of study guides that are prepared for the existing materials. With the university having its own server, network connection within the university and a platform to put its courses on line, it is recommended that the university should transfer some of the course components into the e-learning domain.

All of these exercises would help the unit authors to develop more user-friendly and effective self-learning course materials.

6. Training and Guidelines for Writing:

Further, this study reveals that although The Open University of Sri Lanka has a set of guidelines to follow, there are several shortcomings when it comes to writing instructional material for the university. Many unit authors both internal and external are unfamiliar with the guidelines provided by the Open University in the form of the two booklets.

Many researchers believe that distance curriculum system needs more and better focus in the new learning-teaching environment. According to Perraton (1995) two of the four research questions of wider interest in distance education, are what guidance can be given to academic academics on the curricular content of their courses and what guidance can be given on the instructional design and presentation of courses?

Unit authors of learning resource materials are often inexperienced and require considerable support. Even the most experienced may encounter problems, and the writing process almost invariably takes longer than anticipated. This is especially applicable for the institutes that follow the CT model.

Therefore, if the Open University of Sri Lanka wishes to pursue the Course Team Model as described in the guidelines it must make sure that the unit authors of courses are given an awareness of the contents of these two booklets. There should be comprehensive training on writing instructional materials for both the internal and external unit authors. In certain instances experienced senior academics may opine that they would not need any training in writing self-study materials. This sentiment was expressed by two of the unit authors interviewed. However, as writing self-instructional materials is a specialised skill, all unit authors, however experienced they are in the subject matter, must be given training on writing self-instructional materials before they embark on the writing assignment.

With reference to thrusting lesson writing responsibilities on newly appointed academics is concerned, one of the unit authors interviewed was of the opinion that it must be done only after they have been exposed to distance educational aspects. She also mentioned that the training that is given on self-learning material development would be much more effective if the training is conducted after they have spent some time in the university. This would enable them to understand the system and the problems discussed in the training workshop in a better way.

Thus the authors recommend that the newly appointed academics, before given any lesson writing assignments, must be first allowed to get exposed to the distance education environment, by probably getting involved in course delivery under the guidance of an experienced academic and then undergo training on writing self-instructional materials. It is also recommended that experienced unit authors be given refresher training periodically so as to be in pace with the modern developments in distance education material production.

7. Availability of Time to Write:

One of the major constraints for most of
the internal unit authors of the Open
University (80% of those surveyed) is the
non-availability of time to develop course
materials. It has been revealed through the
study that the academics are burdened with
various tasks, including course delivery,
student counselling, various administrative
functions, etc., in addition to writing lesson
materials. Even those who said they had
time to write course materials when they
were given the task are of the view that if
the same task is given now they would
struggle to find time. This is because when
the writing task was given to them they
were new to the university and did not have
much administrative functions to perform.
At the Open University of Sri Lanka, course
delivery includes conducting day schools,
and laboratory classes, marking assignments and continuous assessment test
papers, guiding students with project works,
and other administrative functions connected to above activities.

In most instances internal unit authors are
required to come out with a set of
instructional material within a year or two.
As a consequence of the various constraints
faced by the internal unit authors the
guidelines are not strictly adhered and the
course materials given to students have not
gone through all the development stages as
required in the guidelines. As a result the
self-learning instructional materials may not
be of the quality envisaged by the
university.

This finding is in consistent with
Siaciwena’s (1989) study in Zambia that
indicated that more than three quarters of
the respondents felt that they did not have
enough time to carry out their
correspondence teaching responsibilities.
Scriven (1986) in Australia discovered that
47% of the staff he surveyed felt that they
were not given adequate time for writing
distance study notes. Both these institutes
follow a dual mode of study where the
lecturers are involved in lecturing regular
students as well as writing lessons for
distance learners. Although the Open
University of Sri Lanka does not practice
dual mode teaching, the academics are
heavily involved in both course material
development and course delivery. Thus
their experiences can be somewhat similar
to that of any dual mode institute.

A recent survey done among all the
academics of the university reveals that
there is unanimity among the academics in
that they should be relieved of certain course
delivery activities such as, conducting day
schools, marking of assignments, laboratory
reports and continuous assessment tests, etc.
(OUSLSenate, 2005). However, there is
also an opinion that the academics can be
involved with day schools that are
conducted in the central campus, as these
would provide the much required feedback
from the students. Anyway day schools and
other activities that are conducted in centres
away from the main campus have to be
done by visiting academics as the university
employs few or no permanent academics in
the centres.

Based on these findings, the authors
recommend that the university should
evolve a mechanism by which the unit
authors are relieved from the various other
duties, especially course delivery and be
given adequate resources to concentrate on
the important task of developing course
materials. However, wherever possible
permanent academics could conduct day
schools as these would enable them to come
into direct contact with the students, thus
providing necessary first hand feedback on
the self instructional course materials
developed by the unit authors.

8. EDITING AND REVISING COURSE
MATERIALS:

The study revealed that in most instances
the course materials written by an author
have not been edited by a subject specialist.
According to Tooth (2000), subject
specialists will be responsible for writing
the materials, and for the accuracy and
appropriateness of the content. The content
should then be checked by another subject
specialist to ensure that it is current and
accurate.

According to Siaciwena (1989), the
quality of study materials would improve
with an increase in the number of
academics involved. Accordingly therefore,
the university must ensure that the course materials are edited before being distributed among its students. The study also revealed that the University does not have a policy on periodic revision of course materials. In certain instances course materials that have been developed ten to fifteen years ago are still being used without any revision. All the unit authors interviewed agreed that the course materials developed must be reviewed every four or five years. It would not be cost effective to review course materials more frequently. However, the time constraint on the part of the academics and the production and distribution problems tend to support the system of producing materials for long-term use. However, it is the opinion of the authors and that of the unit authors surveyed that the university should formulate a policy on revising its course materials periodically.

9. CONCLUSIONS:

The Open University of Sri Lanka has devised its own customised models, based on the Open University of United Kingdom models, to develop self-instructional materials for distance learners. The printed self-instructional materials that are given to the OUSL students are all developed by the University based on these models. However, even these modified models have certain weaknesses. These must be addressed so as to improve the quality of the lesson materials developed. The university should look at all the possible types of course development models and adopt may be two different tailor-made models; one for the courses for which materials are readily available and the other for courses in which completely new materials need to be developed.

The university must have a well-organized programme to train its unit authors on developing self-learning instruction materials.

It should also review the work-load that has been laid upon its permanent academics and devise systems that would ease the time constraints that the academics are faced with so that they could devote adequate time to write lesson materials for the various courses offered by the university. One way of doing this is to employ trained visiting academics to attend to the various course delivery tasks. Currently one of the reasons why permanent academics have to be heavily involved in course delivery is that the lesson materials given to students fall short of being self-instructional materials. However, if academics could devote time and develop quality self-instructional materials then they could be easily delivered by lesser-qualified visiting academics.

The university should also develop mechanisms that would ensure that the course materials written by the unit authors are edited in the first instance and revised later at regular intervals so that the students enrolling at the Open University would be getting quality, updated course materials.

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