

## **Partnerships in On-line Learning: Development of an On-line Curriculum for Application in a For Profit Firm and an Undergraduate Human Resource Degree Program**

*Catherine K. Brooks  
Fredrick M. Nafukho  
Jami Forrester  
University of Arkansas*

*This study describes the process of developing a partnership among a business firm and two separate departments within a public university. This research examines the multiple rationales for developing this partnership and the anticipated outcomes. Not only is the process of successful partnership development identified, the impact of the project outcomes is discussed, as are lessons learned.*

**Keywords:** Online learning, Partnerships, Distance education

As training and education providers are faced with increased competition, both private and public sector enterprises are anxious to find delivery methods to minimize cost and maintain or enhance quality. Asynchronous communication is a type of distance learning that does not require teachers and students to have person-to-person direct interaction at the same time or place. A 1998 report by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation noted that distance learning was characterized by asynchronous learning, which involves teaching/learning activities where the learners are at a distant site from the originator of the teaching material, and a combination of media may be used. Nafukho and Park (2004) observed that the words e-learning, online learning, web-based learning, and virtual learning are used synonymously in the literature.

Much recent research has compared traditional classroom learners with e-learning students. Phipps and Merisotis (1999) noted that distance-learning students share similar grades and attitudes toward distance education as those in traditional education settings. While they also observed that distance learners had a positive view towards learning; a 1999 report from the Institute for Higher Education Policy warns that much of the research regarding distance education is flawed and renders many of the findings inconclusive. Business and industry have looked toward distance education to reduce their training costs. One of the benefits of on-line-learning, a type of asynchronous learning that is facilitated through the Internet, is the ability to “scale-up” a course. Scale-up means to increase student/faculty ratio while maintaining quality education. Scalability is hypothesized to greatly increase the cost effectiveness of on-line delivery versus traditional instruction.

This study describes the process of developing a partnership among a regional business enterprise and two separate organizational units, a division of continuing education and a department of vocational and adult education within a public university. Due to a directive from organization leadership to reduce time and expenses associated with sending associates to the regional training center for instruction, the business firm opted to invest in on-line training development. In search of potential vendors, the business enterprise contacted the Division of Continuing Education (CTED) of the state university to determine its interest and ability to develop on-line training programs for firm’s supervisors and customer service representatives. While part of the training content was specific to the firm, much of the material focused on employment law and other general management subjects. Subsequently, a formal partnership was negotiated in which CTED would assist the business enterprise with converting its existing classroom training for on-line delivery, restructure the trainer’s guide, develop test questions for learning modules, and train the firm’s staff to develop test questions for additional learning modules.

The Division of Continuing Education had pioneered distance education on the university campus. Aside from providing services to business and industry, CTED had partnered with the College of Education’s Department of Vocational and Adult Education to provide an undergraduate degree program to learners at remote sites within the state. This degree program, which had an emphasis in human resource development (HRD), was developed with financial, technical, and administrative support from CTED.

### **Problem Statement**

The increased development and use of anywhere/anytime Learning Networks (ALN) in both the public and private sector has fueled current research to examine a variety of issues associated with asynchronous learning. Due to the

*Copyright © 2005 Catherine K. Brooks, Fredrick M. Nafukho & Jami Forrester*

technology and diverse skills required to develop and implement online programs, partnerships among multiple stakeholders can be beneficial. To determine the success of such partnerships research involving the key stakeholders especially involved in the design and successful delivery of distance learning programs is inevitable. In the absence of empirical data relating to the design and successful delivery of specific partnerships related to online course development, one cannot easily determine the experiences that the key stakeholders go through, hence the need for this study.

### Research Questions

The study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What were the participants' attitudes regarding distance learning before this partnership project began?
2. What were the participants' experiences with distance learning before the project began?
3. What were their reasons for entering into the partnership to participate in this project?
4. What were their expectations regarding the partnership?
5. Which (if any) of their expectations had been met?
6. Which (if any) of their expectations had not been met?
7. Which are the main challenges associated with implementing the project?
8. What the participants would do differently if they had to replicate the process?

### Theoretical Framework

Katz, Ferrara, and Napier (2002) define partnerships as “any relationship created to achieve some mutually beneficial distributed educational goals and objectives between independent organizations” (p. 2). Partnership benefits in the areas of education and business include generating new ideas, leveraging complementary skills, strengths, and markets, balancing financial risk, and acquiring resources for new ventures. While partnerships offer obvious potential, managing these complex partnerships can be daunting. Failed partnerships such as the University of California's exit from the Western Governors University and Princeton University's departure from the University Alliance for Life-long Learning testify to the difficulty maintaining these relationships (Katz et. al., 2002).

Institutional control and economic motivation are the dominant factors that underpin specific partnership models. The American Council on Education Center for Policy Analysis (2002) suggests that distributed learning programs fall into a continuum of eight partnership arrangements that include: 1) single-institution programs, 2) university systems, 3) bilateral partnerships, 4) single-state government consortia, 5) multilateral content syndication consortia, 6) multi-institution programs, 7) prime contractors, and 8) for-profit / nonprofit partnerships.

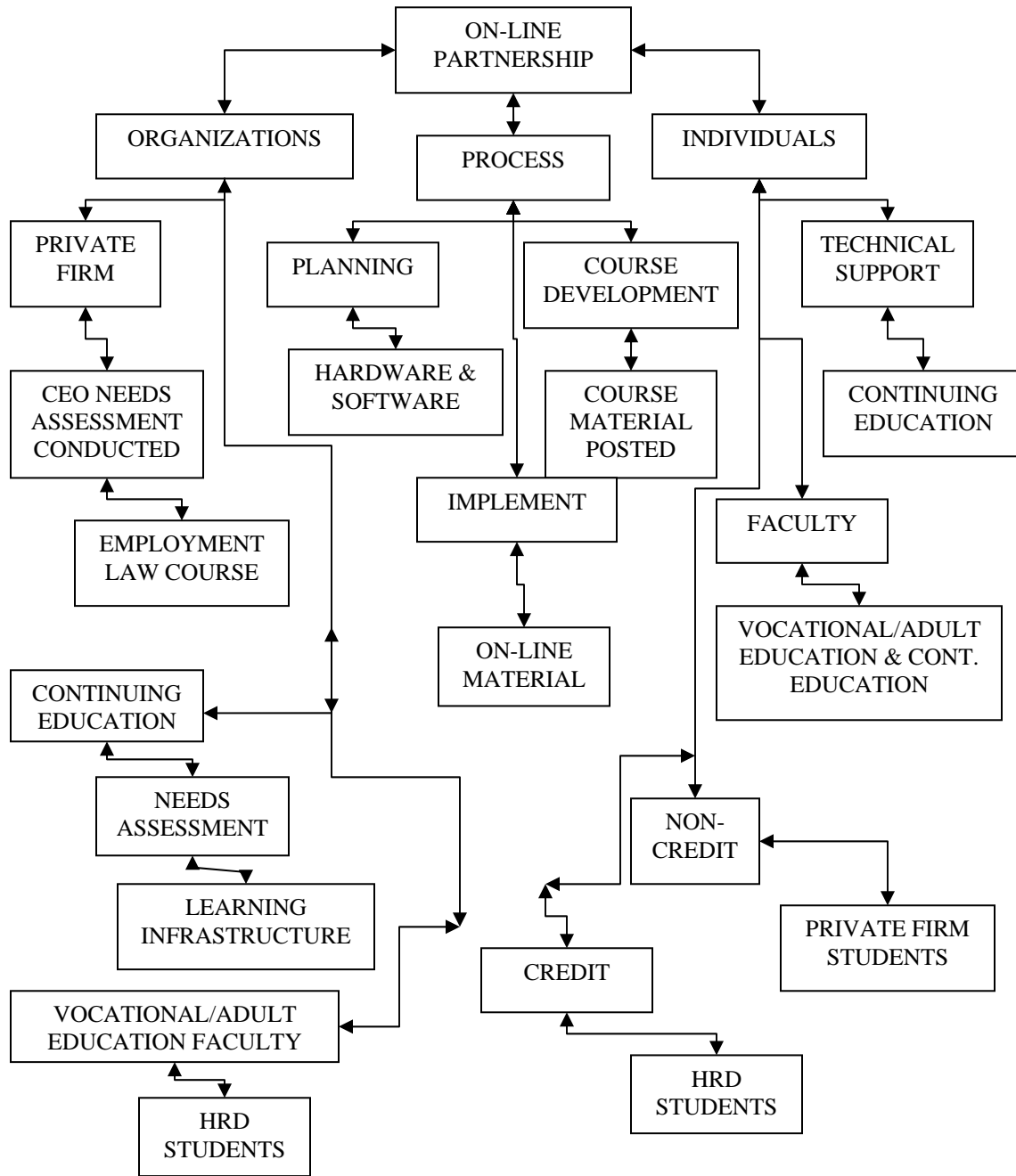
The partnership arrangement described in this research is characterized as a for-profit / nonprofit partnership. This type of partnership is typified by a formal alliance between a university or consortium of universities and a for-profit entity. The *formal alliance* negotiated between the business enterprise and the nonprofit educational institution included partnership objectives and outcomes, partner roles and responsibilities, specific time-lines, delivery dates, fee schedules, and evaluation measurements. While this may sound sequential and simplistic, the following describes the complex network of people and processes that had to be managed during this distributed learning partnership.

### The Process

This section of the paper discusses the process that was initiated to develop a partnership among a regional business enterprise and two separate organizational units of a public university. As shown in Figure 1, three key sectors were involved: organization, process and individuals. A directive from the top management to reduce time and expenses associated with sending employees to the business firm's regional training center for instruction provided the impetus for the firm's HR department to invest in on-line training.

Figure 1 also illustrates the role individuals played in the partnership process. Faculty from CTED and department of Vocational and Adult Education worked in a collaborative manner to develop and launch the on-line courses. Others directly

Figure 1. Partnership Process Model



While they had extensive experience in traditional training, the financial institution was not confident of its ability to produce electronic based instruction in-house. The Division of Continuing Education had pioneered distance education on the university campus. And had a long-standing partnership with the college of education to deliver an undergraduate degree program to learners at remote sites within the state. This degree program, which had an emphasis in human resource development (HRD), was developed with financial, technical, and administrative support from CTED and delivered by college of education faculty. A recent evaluation of the HRD program indicated students' desire to have more management information within the curriculum. Due to faculty workloads and research commitments, management-centered courses were slow to be developed.

At process level, all course development at CTED involved planning and acquisition of the necessary hardware, financially supporting faculty and consultants to develop and deliver course material. The technical staff at CTED helped design web pages and posting of the course material both in non-audio and audio format. Before course material became accessible to students, it was evaluated to ensure it met the needs of all learners, including those with learning disabilities.

## Method

The qualitative approach employed in this study allowed us to understand how the partnership and the design of the distance education program evolved. In a qualitative research, the focus is the lived experiences of the respondents participating in the study (Merriam, 1998). Because this study investigated perceptions associated with the partnership experience of the key stakeholders, qualitative methodology is appropriate. Purposive sampling was employed to assure that data were collected from individuals most intimately familiar with the project, thus establishing a participant criterion. The criterion for participation in this study was having participated in the initial design and development of transforming traditional training from the business enterprise for credit curriculum to be delivered in an electronic format. The primary stakeholders and the technical personnel associated with the curriculum design of the program were interviewed. Participants from CTED that worked directly with the industry partner on the project included the dean, the director of non-credit courses and two technical and instructional design experts. The training liaison from the business firm partner was formally interviewed to ascertain perceptions regarding the project. Observation, informal interviews, and document review were used to document issues associated with adjusting and implementing the non-credit training material into college credit curriculum. Those observed and informally interviewed included the department head who supervises the degree program, in which the material was used, the faculty member who piloted the on-line material, the undergraduate advisor who directs the registration of the on-line courses, and the human resources president from the business enterprise. Additionally, project documents were reviewed to support these interviews and observations.

For formal interviews, a standardized, open-ended interview guide was used to ensure consistency. Five participants were personally interviewed and their responses tape-recorded with permission. The interviews were subsequently transcribed and analyzed using content analysis to identify patterns and emergent themes among the data (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Merriam, 1998). Interview questions encouraged respondents to discuss their individual roles and expectations of the partnership. They were also asked to describe the barriers and facilitators of the project and the degree to which the project expectations had been met. Additionally, respondents were asked to reflect on their perceptions regarding distance education prior to and following project completion. In addition to personal interviews, extant data pertaining to the on-line program were collected and analyzed. This material included internal reports, memorandums, and meeting minutes. The use of triangulation, incorporating multiple data sets and collection methods, ensured data rigor and validity. To manage researcher bias, the researchers used peer debriefing and member checks during data analysis to ensure that the inferences made were grounded. Data analysis identified patterns or main themes that were consistent among data sets. These main themes are presented and discussed in the following section.

## Findings

While each respondent had different roles and responsibilities within the project, major themes emerged regarding the project. These themes included: *project expectations*, *project obstacles*, *project outcomes*, and *lessons learned*. Each of these themes is discussed below.

### *Expectations*

Stakeholders had preconceived notions about their roles and responsibilities, as well as the scope of the project. For example, individuals from CTED had very definite expectations about the amount of work that would be required to convert the traditional curriculum into an electronic format. One respondent indicated, "I thought the curriculum was supposed to be already complete." Another CTED participant echoed, "The content was supposed to be done, not half-done. The lessons were supposed to be ready for electronic transfer." These same respondents had expected the project to run smoothly and on time. One CTED participant indicated that "I thought they (industry partner) would honor their due dates." Another said, "I kept thinking that we could stay on schedule, but the amount of time it took to make the *course material ready* was not anticipated."

The industry partner had their own set of expectations. One respondent indicated that the project would produce "customized regulatory compliant curriculum that would meet the needs of adult learners and reduce travel time for those learners." Additionally, the product was anticipated to be "cost-effective and updatable."

Stakeholders from the educational unit that anticipated using the curriculum in an undergraduate program described expectations that included “having curriculum that bridged a gap in the program.” They also indicated, “students had requested a business-oriented class that focused on human resource management issues.” Additionally, one respondent suggested the benefit of having material that “our department did not have to pay for” was of great value.

#### *Obstacles*

Many of the obstacles that participants identified were related to their expectations of the project that were discussed above. Resources, including staffing, money, and time were estimated based on expectations regarding the status of the curriculum at project inception. The following comments illustrate how these flawed expectations created obstacles for the stakeholders. One CTED participant indicated, “The curriculum was unacceptable for online course.” Another indicated that problems with the curriculum included “It violated copyright laws. Nothing was cited.” Still another indicated that, “The material had to be researched and reworked. We did not anticipate having to develop a new curriculum.”

The gap between what the stakeholders at CTED anticipated being *completed curriculum* and what they received created obstacles that included unrealistic completion dates and increased development time. The unmet expectations and physical distance between stakeholders also resulted in personality clashes and poor communication. One CTED participant indicated noted, “I could direct my people about the process, but I couldn’t direct their (partner) people.” Another participant indicated the frustration at having “one group would be ready to move and have to wait on another group.” Additionally, different stakeholders had “different opinions about the esthetics of the product and this slowed the process down.” One participant at the business firm observed, “I devoted much more time to the project than I had anticipated.” Another participant from CTED said, “I thought I would just play an administrative role, I ended up editing copy.” Because inadequate resources had been directed to the project, one CTED participant felt that “It was not a dedicated effort. We had to pull people who were not supposed to be on the project and bring them up to speed.”

Participants from the educational unit indicated that the process took much longer than anticipated. Additionally, one participant indicated that “the course development took a very long time, and then we had to wait another lengthy period to get the course listed in the course catalog. We thought students would have access to the course six months earlier.” Once the course was approved for college credit, the educational unit had to deal with “relieving the anxiety of students who had never taken an online course and did not know the instructor.” Likewise, the business enterprise had to “prepare an orientation for new online learners, which took time.”

#### *Outcomes*

When participants discussed the project, they often referred to its outcomes. These outcomes consisted of issues related to both the product and the process. While 100% of those interviewed described the experience as frustrating, with frustration came growth and learning. One participant said, “We did take a team approach to try to keep up with our client and our other duties. While we thought that would be enough to juggle all the unforeseen incidents that might happen, we had the technical expertise to complete the project, but not the time. What was supposed to take six weeks took two years.” This individual went on to say, “While the experience was very frustrating, we learned a great deal. Mostly, we learned that we did not know as much about the client as we needed to. But, our relationship with the client is still strong.” Another respondent said that frustration associated with the project could have been avoided because, “There were issues of quality that were never really discussed on the front end about what quality would look like and how it would be measured. Instead it was merely well let’s do it and proceed.” This individual added that the outcome of the project was... “a developed curriculum that was delivered by making the rules up as we went along. It seems crazy now looking back.” One respondent described the project as, “frustrating and very exhilarating.” The source of the exhilaration was, “We learned much about how we work together as an organization under tremendous pressure. We were stretching ourselves by taking this on.” Another respondent added, “It was so rewarding to see the completed project. It met our expectations for quality and comprehensiveness.” Still another participant mentioned the impact that the project’s outcome had on students and faculty by saying, “The instructor gets reviews for the course and students love it. It really complements our existing curriculum and fills a gap in the knowledge they need to be exposed to. There is a waiting list for the course.” One respondent from the business enterprise noted, “It is premature to discuss the total impact of the project, but we anticipate good results.” Each respondent was asked to describe the most important lessons learned from this project. The responses are listed below.

#### *Lessons Learned*

The majority of responses to the question regarding lessons learned described project management issues. For example, each participant indicated the need to have a better understanding of all stakeholder expectations. This was deemed necessary because, “...they seemed to get lost in the translation during the project.” There was a real sense

that not only was there a need to define roles and responsibilities, "...they needed to be spelled out to each partner." Several participants indicated the need for, "...more team meetings to keep the communication flowing." In addition there was a need for, "...a dedicated manager or project leader that had authority to make decisions." Each respondent indicated the need for more front-end planning to strengthen the understanding among partners. One respondent said, "Now we know what questions to ask and what to insist on before entering into this type of arrangement again. We learned a lot about our selves, our teams, and our partner." Yet another said, "Patience is a virtue. If you are willing to take a risk and you have competent people working with you, things have a way of working out."

While the participants represented each of the three partnership entities, there appears to be striking similarities regarding project perceptions. When analyzing the perceived project obstacles, the majority of the respondents lack of sufficiently defined roles and responsibilities on the front end. Document review indicated that while there were formal roles and timelines proposed by the initial memorandum of understanding, they were without sufficient detail and did not account for unanticipated issues. Frustration was a common descriptor of the project. This frustration was influenced by the inadequate front-end planning. While all individuals describe the project as a great learning experience, the respondent's body language and voice inflection indicate that it was a trying process and one that could have been circumvented by having a more precise process in place prior to commencement.

### **Contribution to Human Resource Development**

The significance of this study to HRD is that it illustrates the impact of insufficient project planning and project management. This is particularly critical when organizational cultures differ and their influence on stated expectations. Having clear understanding of the *meaning* of these expectations is essential for all project stakeholders. This familiarization can be labor intensive on the front-end; it can minimize the number of unintended consequences and facilitate project completion. Systems theory, an integral of HRD and organizational development can inform the practices of those involved in partnerships such as the one described in this study. The challenge remains for HRD professionals to implement these best practices while being impacted by scarce resources such as time, money, and long term planning.

### **References**

- Katz, R. N., Ferrara, M., & Napier, I. S. (2002). *Partnerships in distributed education.(Distributed Education: Challenges, Choices, and a New Environment Monograph No 5)*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
- Mayukut, P., & Morehouse, R. (1994). *Beginning qualitative research: A philosophic and practical guide*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Nafukho, F. M. & Park, O. D. (2004). *Essential tips for planning and development of online courses*. In D. Christopher and S. Jaderstrom (Eds.). *E-World: Virtual learning, Collaborative Environments, and future technologies* (pp.209-222). Reston, VA: National Business Education Association.
- Phipps, R. A. & Merisotis, J. P. (1999). *What's the difference? A review of contemporary research on the effectiveness of distance learning in higher education*. Washington, DC: The Institute for Higher Education Policy.
- Phipps, R. A., Wellman, J. V. & Merisotis, J. P. (1998). *Assuring quality in distance learning: A preliminary review*. Washington, DC: Council for Higher Education Accreditation.