Teaching and learning about community development online: Insights and lessons learned

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Abstract: This paper discusses the development, delivery, and evaluation of a successful graduate course in community development offered to students across Canada via the Internet. The review of literature points to common themes in distance education, community development and health promotion. The course, "Health Promotion: Community Development Approaches", is presented as a case example with descriptions of the curriculum, delivery methods, learning resources, activities and recommendations for future offerings of the course and for distance education in general. Although web-based distance education is challenging and requires instructors and learners to adapt, it can be an effective way to learn about concepts, and model the principles and ideology that are at the core of community development.

Résumé : Le présent article aborde l'élaboration, la prestation et l'évaluation d'un cours de niveau supérieur traitant du développement communautaire offert aux étudiants de l'ensemble du Canada par Internet. L'examen de la documentation souligne les sujets communs dans l'éducation à distance, le développement communautaire et la promotion de la santé. Le cours « *Health Promotion: Community Development Approaches* » est

présenté à titre d'exemple avec les descriptions du plan de cours, des modes de prestation, des ressources d'apprentissage, des activités et des recommandations pour les cours qui seront donnés ultérieurement et pour l'éducation à distance en général. Bien que l'éducation à distance effectuée au moyen du Web présente des défis et qu'elle exige des instructeurs et des apprenants qu'ils s'adaptent, il peut s'agir d'une méthode efficace pour en apprendre sur les concepts et pour présenter les principes et idées à la base du développement communautaire.

Introduction

A course in "Community Development" is a common feature within preparation programs of health and social service professionals. Understanding concepts of community development (CD) and how they are applied are essential for effective practice in today's community-based and intersectoral work environments. Indeed, community development concepts such as capacity building have broad application and are currently in common use by practitioners working with individuals, families, groups, various kinds of organizations, and even government.

In the past, health professionals were prepared either through traditional, in-classroom methods or through a mentorship process, both of which allowed for interaction between the professor and students. Now distance learning via the Internet is available and can be the preferred choice of individuals who are unable to relocate to attend school at another geographic location or unable to attend school full-time. Learning from a distance also permits employers to avoid the "brain drain" and retain trained individuals in rural or remote locations. Along with the benefits come challenges associated with technology, isolation from other learners and the instructor, and learning about relationship-oriented concepts in a text-based environment.

In this paper, the focus is on describing experiences of teaching community development via the Internet. The intent of the course was to teach the concepts within an environment that modeled the ideology and principles, particularly high-level participation or engagement and empowerment. This course was (and is) taught by the first author as part of a partnership involving four Canadian universities collaborating to offer a Master of Science degree program in Heath Promotion Studies at the University of Alberta. Health Promotion is the process of enabling individuals and communities to increase control over, and improve their health (World Health Organization Ottawa Charter, 1986). Central values include participation, empowerment and positive change. Varnhagen, Wilson, Krupa, Kasprzak and Hunting (2005) have described the program curriculum and delivery. The lessons learned through the presentation of this case example could be useful for other instructors who are developing similar relationship-oriented courses via the Internet.

Distance Learning

According to King, Young, Drivere-Richmond, and Schrader (2001), distance education is

"formalized instructional learning where the time/geographic situation constrains learning by not affording in-person contact between student and instructor" (p. 7). Today distance education is two-way communication, and may employ a variety of technologies, including audio- or video-conferencing and various Internet-based conferencing technologies (Anderson, 1992; Holmberg, 1980; Rumble, 1989). The increasing popularity of distance education has challenged "both institutions and communities to adapt to change in the philosophy, technology and practices of both learners and teachers" (Anderson, 1992, p. 87).

"In-person" education has the advantage of direct relational communication between the learners and the instructors via body language, humour and rapid feedback that can happen in such an environment. Distance education, particularly using asynchronous, text-based communication, may present several advantages, including more time for reflection before answering, use of distributed resources without interrupting the flow of discussion or class presentations, and permanent recording of many interactions for research and evaluation purposes (King et al., 2001). Some interpersonal factors that inhibit communication and learning may also be reduced or eliminated. These include the effects of gender, perceived power, facility with language, and differences in participation in group environments. Atack and Rankin (2002) note that web-based asynchronous (as opposed to synchronous or "real time") distance learning is convenient for nurses, many of whom work shifts, have family responsibilities, and live at a distance from educational institutions. Others agree, stating that taking courses by distance is one way in which community development can occur because local capacity is enhanced partly because geographic barriers are eliminated (Helphinstine, 1995).

Researchers have taken an interest in the links between distance education and community development. According to Robinson (1992), distance education can be used to empower people and build capacity in northern communities by working with local experience and traditional knowledge, and undertaking participatory action research to solve local problems. Similarly, Wall (1992) noted that the participation of indigenous people from remote communities in distance teacher education "ensures respect for their knowledge systems and promotes the sustainability of the educational endeavor" (p. 1).

Health Promotion and Community Development

Health promotion focuses on enabling individuals and communities to increase their control of actors that affect their health and well-being (World Health Organization, 1986). Health promotion is about working far upstream in the prevention spectrum to address broad social determinants of health including healthy child development, income and education, social support, personal behaviours and coping skills, and access to needed services. At the core of work in health promotion and prevention are the concepts of empowerment, community development and working in intersectoral teams to address complexities associated with the determinants of health. Raeburn and Rootman (1997) provided an operational definition of empowerment and a description of empowering process as highly participatory and oriented toward strength-building.

Empowerment involves control over life affairs, which is established by a process of strength-building at the community, group and personal levels. It is accomplished through people gaining access to the knowledge, skill, material and political resources needed to give them control over, and the ability to undertake, the decisions and activities they deem to be appropriate in the health promotion context.

Community development in health promotion focuses on enabling groups to mobilize, unite across sectors, work together effectively to understand determinants of health and well being, and bring about positive change. This includes developing organizational and leadership capacity, acknowledging and building on strengths, respecting community values, fostering cohesiveness and trust, and learning from experiences. High level participation with a growing sense of individual ownership and group membership are needed to move ahead on the range of tasks necessary to accomplish the lofty goals. Among the key tasks are the following: formulate appropriate philosophies of action, engage the range of interest groups, create and adjust plans to address concerns, make decisions about resources, share responsibility and workload even when there may be no direct payback, assess outcomes, and unite in advocacy. The development of a community with strength in thought, in voice and in action is essential.

Communities can network, learn and demonstrate community development through technological connections. For example, community networking projects throughout the United States include local participation, collaboration and the use of technology to address their local needs such as economic development (Gonzalez, 1997). It is important therefore to ensure that individuals who will work in community development are prepared to use technology as a means to accomplish this. Hence, teaching a community development course through distance education is one way in which they can begin their preparation.

Creating an Educational Partnership

Development of the graduate course in health promotion took place in the context of a partnership aimed at improving graduate level education in health promotion. Three universities were involved originally: The Centre of Health Promotion Studies at the University of Alberta, the Department of Community Health Sciences at the University of Calgary and the School of Health Sciences at the University of Lethbridge, all in Alberta, Canada. The partnership was formed in 1999 to collaboratively deliver the distance education option of a Master of Science health promotion degree available from the University of Alberta. The University of Toronto joined the collaborative in 2000.

The interdisciplinary Centre for Health Promotion Studies was launched in 1996 and began to offer online graduate courses the following year (Wilson et al., 2000). The graduate program was designed to support the development of leaders in health promotion practice, policy development, evaluation and research across Canada, and provide learners with access to higher education while continuing to live in their home communities (seewww.chps.ualberta.ca for details on the current program). Since its inception, the

Centre for Health Promotion Studies has studied the students' and instructors' experiences with, and adaptation to, online graduate education (Wilson et al., 2003).

The varied background of faculty members from the four universities ensures that the students are exposed to a range of disciplines, teaching styles and theoretical ideas. The students themselves represent a variety of disciplines including nursing, public health sciences, psychology, nutrition, physical education and recreation, and rehabilitation (speech and language, physio-, and occupational) therapy .

In 2000, a grant of $156,000 was received from the Learning Enhancement Envelope (LEEIV) to develop and deliver five courses via the Internet. This grant assisted with consultation and staff release for course development, transportation for planning meetings, purchase of library holdings at each of the collaborating universities, computer hardware and software and evaluation of the initiative. Meetings were held at the beginning of the process to jointly decide the manner in which the courses would be developed, delivered and evaluated. The second author's advice on the process of delivering the courses by distance included developing course guides and conducting class discussions using computer mediated conferencing (CMC). This individual also monitored the courses and provided feedback while the course was being offered to assist the professor in making any changes during the course delivery. Faculty outside the University of Alberta had no previous experience with distance learning and appreciated assistance in making the transition from the in-classroom model to the Internet model.

The group discussed course content in the context of the Masters program curriculum to ensure that the concept, skill and attitude objectives were addressed. Each faculty member made individual arrangements with their respective institutions to ensure that development and instruction of the distance course was considered part of their teaching assignment rather than an additional assignment (which would not be sustainable). This demonstrated true support of the course because it allowed instructors from different institutions to have their teaching assignments counted across institutions. A project management plan was established and a timetable for offering courses was developed. The timetable ensured that students had the opportunity to take the required and elective courses they required, and to ensure that faculty was available to teach at the appropriate times.

During the development and implementation stages, and after the courses were offered, the team met in teleconference and face-to-face sessions to discuss concerns and issues, and collaborate in solving problems and improving content and delivery. Evaluators participated in the joint meetings and conducted an evaluation of each of the courses. Changes were made based upon this evaluation as well as the standard evaluation surveys students completed for each course.

Two recent publications have focused on evaluation of learning from the perspectives of students and instructors. One article addresses instructors' adaptation related to teaching online courses (Wilson, Varnhagen, Krupa, Kasprzak, Hunting & Taylor, 2003). All eight

instructors were interviewed for the study. The themes generated from their responses are useful in understanding the development of successful online teaching in the program. Instructors noted greater student participation in online than campus discussions, as well as a more rapid development of bonding among learners. Asynchronous online discussions were less spontaneous than those on campus, as participants were online at different times. The instructors found benefits to providing regular positive feedback and ensuring clear communications to avoid misunderstandings. Online teaching required more upfront planning and preparation and a time commitment to respond to the online discussions. The amount and type of work required for successful online teaching was, however, largely unrecognized by the instructors' academic supervisors.

A second article by the University of Alberta team (Varnhagen et al., 2005) discusses students' perspectives and compares the instructional technology of three online courses. Students appreciated the development of peer relationships, faculty support, and the flexibility associated with the online learning community. The students further appreciated the high level of instructor presence but found they did not always experience sufficient feedback in their learning process. The learners perceived a greater depth of discussion but were sometimes overwhelmed by the large number of postings to review and responded to. Technical problems sometimes frustrated the participants and hampered the successful use of the course site.

Teaching the Community Development Course by Distance

The course, "Health Promotion: Community Development Approaches," has been taught four times since 2000, each time using computer mediated conferencing (CMC) using Web Course Tools (WebCT) software. Asynchronous weekly class discussions were used as the primary means of communication and instruction. The students who have enrolled in this 13-week course have been predominantly students in the Masters' program who are often practicing nurses, community nutritionists and social workers. Although the instructional process evolved according to student feedback and instructor reflection, the content has remained unchanged. The following discussion is an overview of the course content and the process through which it is currently delivered.

Theoretical Content

The course begins with a discussion of the meaning of *community*. The literature that accompanies this discussion is drawn from sources that discuss community as a social process (Raphael et al., 1999; Walter, 1997) to uncover and challenge the students' notions of community and illuminate the problems associated with assumptions of shared meaning. Then we examine the inter-connected concepts of *social justice, empowerment,* and *participation*. The readings and subsequent discussion are designed to create a safe yet stimulating environment. Learners deconstruct and reconstruct the meaning of these concepts that are central to understanding, envisaging, creating strategies for, and implementing, community development. As an example, an article by Brunt, Lindsey and Hopkinson (1997) on empowerment among the Hutterites—a communal religious group—encourages the students to consider if empowerment is an ethnocentric

concept and what the implications are for practice. Other concepts, including *resiliency* (Kulig, 1999),*competency* (Eng & Parker, 1994) and *sustainability* (Hosler, 1998) are similarly examined within our learning community in a way that reinforces the contextual nature for understanding community as an interacting collective of strengths and tensions rather than simply as a "bunch" of individuals.

T he process of community assessment is explored through readings and CMC, reconstructing a developmental path from traditional methods to current strategies that emphasize community capacity (McKnight & Kretzman, 1997), and community profiles (http://ceinfo.unh.edu/commprof.htm). With a clearer vision of possible goals, the discussion can move to how community development is initiated, guided and sustained. Rothman (1995) and McNeely (1999) have synthesized theoretical frameworks to assist practitioners in understanding and organizing for community development according to an ecological model and a community building model respectively. Examples of community development projects demonstrate applications of these theoretical orientations. An article on community coalitions (McMillan, Florin, Stevenson, Kerman & Mitchell, 1995) introduces learners to a community organizing method and discussion relating to creating organizational units to clarify and advance a community agenda.

The last unit of the course focuses on evaluation of community development projects (e.g., Judd, Frankish & Moulton, 2001) and policy and research within the field (e.g., Foo et al., 1999). An interpretive summary is provided as a guide and stimulus to learners, and discussion is led by the students to emulate how it would be facilitated within the workplace as an evaluation consultant.

Course Delivery

Readings and specific questions help focus the learner's attention on key issues. As the course evolved, the instructor developed a series of content syntheses and PowerPoint presentations, as well as a case study on CD-ROM which provided background on a specific religious group and illustrated the community development process being implemented with them. The WebCT course web site is relatively easy for students to navigate, allowing them to download the course outline, weekly syntheses, additional resources related to the topics, experiential activities, weekly CMC and links to web sites associated with community development.

The course outline, sent by e-mail and available on the web site, includes the course description, learning objectives and an explanation of the teaching methods employed. Assignments are described in detail, along with marking criteria and information about grading, but are open to evolution to optimize for the learning community. "At-a-glance" and detailed weekly schedules (with topics, literature and questions to start discussion) are provided, but adapted to accommodate learner needs and interests. In addition to textbooks and "CoursePack" readings, learners in the two most recent course offerings (2003 and 2005) also received a free copy of the case study on CD-ROM.

Assignments

In the most recent (2005) offering of the course, students completed four assignments. For the first, students chose a "Best Practice in Community Development" to investigate, then presented to colleagues the major concepts, a critical examination of conceptual literature, and relevant examples from literature or personal experiences.

The next two assignments are based on a case study: an application of community development theory in a specific community context. The documents and vignettes illuminate the historical, social and economic context of a rural community dealing with issues which affect health and development (e.g., placement of an intensive livestock operation). Students are challenged to make the connection between concepts (i.e., empowerment, capacity building, community organizing) and practice. The case study is also used in the weekly CMC discussions to raise and explore key issues and deepen understanding of key concepts.

In the fourth and final assignment, students participate in, and analyze a community development project of their choosing. Topics range from developing a healthy breakfast program with seniors, to grocery shopping with adolescents, to assisting agencies come together and increasing the community's capacity to address child mental health issues. The learners must gain permission from the community group to work on the project, and commit to engaging people with the health issue, and provide a final copy of their summary and recommendation paper to stakeholders. Through the paper, the student shares their learning with the agency, but also assists in building the agency's capacity to understand and take action on the health issue. Unlike clinical practica, the project has no specifications regarding the amount of time to complete. Rather, it is an opportunity for the learner to apply then analyze CD concepts in practice.

The quality of learners' participation is also assessed, including contributions to critical thinking, and building the group's capacity for understanding and applying CD principles. This mark is based on a self-evaluation according to a specified criteria.

The Discussion Process and Special Features

Lead questions are used to spark the weekly computer-mediated conferencing (CMC) sessions. Each of the learners is expected to post at least three quality contributions per week. The initial contributions are a response to the discussion questions, and subsequent contributions respond to other students' and the instructor's ideas to further suggest theoretical applications. Each week, a different student takes the lead on the discussion. The instructor guides the discussions, supporting the interaction and the student leader in an empowering way.

Experiential, interactive web-based activities were incorporated within the course to enhance engagement of learners while deepening understanding of community development concepts. As an example, early in the course, students are asked to "build a tower" with specified materials, and in collaboration with friends, family and/or colleagues in their home or work setting. Tower building consists of gathering a 60 cm x 90 cm poster board, 12 paper clips, 45 cm of string, glue, scissors and a felt pen. The students are

directed to create a free-standing tower with these supplies and attach pictures of the process and the final product on the CMC posting on their reflection of the experience. This leads the learners to develop insights into participation, collaboration and partnerships as well as resources to ensure that community development occurs. For example, one of the greatest resources in building the tower is the creativity of the human mind in deciding the initial design (resources and partnerships). The tower is difficult to build by oneself; it is awkward to hold and glue it together or tie the string around it (participation, collaboration and partnerships).

Using audio-visual tools with distance students can be challenging and is not always feasible due to ethical, pedagogical and logistical issues. In an attempt to address this gap, a CD-ROM was developed in 2003 to present a case study of a project that is being conducted among the Low-German-Speaking (LGS) (Kanadier) Mennonites (Hall & Kulig, 2004; Hall, Kulig, Campbell, Wall, & Babcock, 2005; Kulig et al., 2002; Kulig & Hall, 2004, Kulig, Hall, Babcock, Campbell, & Wall, 2004). Working with this unique religious group of Anabaptist origin, and creating a portrayal of that work, posed many challenges. LGS Mennonites who can hold more conservative views emphasize separation from the world, rejection of technology and isolation from outsiders. It is common for this group of Mennonites to believe that physical illness is caused by straying away from God and by not living an acceptable spiritual life. In addition, many members of this group rely on Christian-based home schooling to ensure that their traditions and ideology are maintained.

Understandably, work with these groups requires considerable negotiation, particularly with the ministers and most respected community members. Developing trusting, respectful and reciprocal relationships is key. Willingness to compromise is essential for continuing work with the group. The CD-ROM, sent to students via surface mail, presents a history of this group and an overview of community development projects with them. Principles of community development are illuminated, with explicit links to how they are being applied among the LGS Mennonites.

Linking Concepts with the Distance Community Development Course

Traditionally, community development process was taught and learned through role modeling. This is challenging in a classroom, away from a natural context, and even more so when communication occurs in text, asynchronously via the web. Acknowledging this challenge, a conscious effort was made by the instructor (Kulig) and the coordinator (Krupa), then the students, to consider ways to overcome the barriers presented. The following examples are based in the knowledge generated from the experiences, and instructor reflection, of the various course offerings including student feedback with support from the relevant literature.

Empowerment is a process and outcome in successful community development (Minkler, 1997). We, therefore, sought ways to increase learners' sense of efficacy in shaping,

contributing to, owning and controlling *their* course. In the first week and at several points along the path, students were invited to suggest changes to improve the course delivery and content—to make it work better for them. When the course enrolment exceeded the practical size for discussions via the CMC, we asked the students to offer ways to re-structure, considering the benefit of all involved. The students suggested ways to adjust the course which were discussed with the instructor and then incorporated. These suggestions included taking turns as the leader to start the discussions in the CMC several times throughout the course and having a clear agreed upon expectation of how many weekly postings were acceptable to make the volume manageable. Through these examples the group illustrated key features of community development including shared responsibility for their learning through open discussion and problem solving. This process led to a more manageable workload for all, increased the sense of control and empowerment for students over course delivery, and increased satisfaction for both students and instructors.

Participation is key to success in community development. A goal was for students to understand that high-level participation (in this case via CMC) is important for individual learning but also for building the capacity of the group as a whole to understand and act. Commitment to the group and its goals mimics community behaviours necessary for development. Exploring and demonstrating this in the class environment was found to provide a useful stimulus to reflection and discussion on the concept in CMC.

Related to empowerment is the notion of capacity building, in this case, for health. The readings, discussions and assignments outlined previously provided opportunities for learners to build personal capacity in oral and written communication skills and increase their understanding and practical application of theory and principles. The CMC process provided students with opportunities to apply and develop leadership and group facilitation skills. The ideology and beliefs related to community organizing and community development were explored within the safer, power differential-reduced CMC environment as a means to "sort out and test" what could be applicable in their development projects and in future roles as a community developer. CMC discussions typically uncovered a range of opinions. Students learned how to craft responses that displayed respect while disagreeing based upon articulated values and beliefs. Learning about complex and diverse ideas, and how they can be built from experience and incorporated in action as a group is an essential skill that we found could be developed through participation in the course.

Graphic, hands-on activities such as "building a tower" were adapted to our web-based learning environment and successfully illustrated abstract concepts in a concrete, manner. The activities encouraged students to engage with family, friends or colleagues regarding the course material and ensured that isolation from other students would not be a hindrance in experiencing community development dynamics. The activity also demonstrated how partnerships can begin—with simple activities that bring people together and sparked interaction about ideas that are important to their well-being.

Lessons Learned, Recommendations and Concluding Comments

The course is taught as a key component in the Masters program and will continue to develop based upon student feedback, instructor reflection and developments in the field. From these levels of feedback and from the experiences of teaching the course several lessons were learned about the process of teaching community development at a distance.

1. Instructors who teach community development in this manner need to be learner-centred, reflective about their teaching style and creative in developing process and content that reflect the ideology and principles of community development. The text-oriented, web-based format may require adaptation of activities and assignments to facilitate participation, empowerment and capacity building.
2. Audio-visual aids can enhance learning and can be produced and distributed using CD-ROM technology. These may need to be developed by the faculty member due to their current lack of availability, and the sensitivities surround such materials. Developing learning resources typically requires much more time than one might think. Financial and institutional support needs to be secured for this to occur. Still images may be used as an intermediate step. These are easily accessed via e-mail and/or in course web sites. In all cases, care must be taken to gain approval from community people well in advance.
3. Although the course was taught using CMC, web-based audio software has recently become more stable, appropriate and cost-effective. We are excited about the potential of software such as Elluminate Live!® for facilitating synchronous interaction among learners at a distance. In the context of other health promotion classes, our instructor team is documenting its effectiveness in engaging students and enhancing learning through role plays, town hall meetings and debates. In addition to facilitating audio conferencing and the sharing of graphics, it enables learners to engage on an affective level—to share control of the environment and collaborate freely outside of the normal class structure. Our recommendation is to use the simplest technology that permits effective communication, is appropriate for the learning objectives, is technically stable reliable, and fits within your budget.
4. Investing time in organizing for instruction is another key. According to student feedback, developing the detailed course outline, including clear objectives, weekly discussion questions, and assignment marking guides helped ensure success of the course. Each time the course is taught, instructors need to invest time to update literature, reflect on instructional approaches, and adjust discussion questions. With this structure as a backdrop, instructors can then engage the students is modifying the learning components to meet their needs and take advantage of their strengths and assets

Teaching and learning at a distance is an important option for many students and, particularly, for those who cannot leave their work and relocate for their graduate programs. It may also be important for organizations to consider if they wish to retain skilled individuals in rural and remote locations. Sharing teaching strategies and creating opportunities to allow dialogue among educators and practitioners is a first step toward improvement in offerings to support those preparing for roles as community developers.

We found that teaching and learning at a distance was challenging. It required considerable adaptation and was not suited for all instructors and all learners (at least at the time of our study). Those who teach, or wish to learn about, community development theory and process, and are concerned about the lack of face-to-face contact, can be assured that success can be achieved at a distance using current technologies and instructional practices. Although web-based distance education is challenging and requires instructor

and learners to adapt, it can be an effective way to learn about concepts, and model the principles and ideology that are at the core of community development.

Acknowledgement

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