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# Delivering Distance Learning in Rural Solomon Islands: Practical Issues and Concerns

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*Abstract: This paper is intended to inform readers about the use of on-line learning in rural Solomon Islands. The Distance Learning Centre Project is still in its early stages of implementation and therefore, this paper is not intended to provide a rigorous evaluation of the project or to assess student attainments. The objective of the project was to improve access to quality education in rural communities. The implementation of the project was funded by European Union and New Zealand Aid. There are nine Distance Learning Centres currently running and are located in rural communities across the country. The centres were equipped with network services, solar power and learning technologies. The learning technologies were hooked onto the network with six laptop computers in each centre. There were 15 courses offered on-line using the synchronous tuition tools. Observing the first year of the project, some practical issues and concerns are examined that relates to empowerment and access to quality education. The paper concludes with reflections on the issues of adequacy, practicality of teaching technical and vocational skills on-line, future sustainability, the importance of follow up and the need for further research to investigate the pertinent issues highlighted in this paper.*

Keywords: Distance Learning, Learning Technologies, On-line Learning, Distance Learning Centres, Solomon Islands

## Introduction

**R**URAL DISTANCE LEARNING centres, as in regular rural schools, face unique challenges associated with geographic isolation, racial segregation, and limited resources (Johnson & Strange, 2007). For instance, many rural schools experience difficulties attracting and retaining teachers for a variety of reasons including lower salary levels. Similarly, rural school districts can have difficulties offering a comprehensive curriculum that includes upper-level courses and vocational courses because of financial and human capital constraints. Aronson and Timms (2004) indicated that faculty in some high schools lack the expertise to teach specialized courses.

Besides problems associated with teacher shortage, rural schools also face circumstances in which it is not practical to offer specialized courses because there may be an insufficient number of students in a school that are adequately prepared or interested in taking such courses. For some years researchers (Barker & Hall, 1994) have suggested that distance learning-including the use of Internet and web-based materials, interactive television, computer conferencing, and multimedia modules may be instrumental in helping to solve some of the problems rural schools face.

This paper examines the delivery of distance learning in rural Distance Learning Centres Project (DLCP) in Solomon Islands. The aim of this paper is to report the initiation and the first stages of the implementation of the project. This means that it is intended to inform readers about the use of on-line innovations for distance learning in rural Solomon Islands. DLCP is still being implemented and therefore, this paper is not intended to provide a rigorous evaluation of the project or to assess student attainments. The following questions are discussed:

1. Why was the rural Distance Learning Centre Project initiated?
2. What were the main learning technologies involved and how are they developed?
3. What courses were offered by the Centres?
4. What are the issues and concerns arising from the introduction and integration of learning technologies into the Rural Distance Learning Centres?

### **Teaching and Learning with Technology**

Critical to the discussion about teaching and learning with technology are the concepts: *course*, *on-line learning* and *distance education*. In this paper, the term ‘course’ is used to refer to a component or a unit of study in a discipline which is normally completed after a number of weeks or one semester. Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) say “on-line classes or learning are courses that are delivered completely on the Internet. The term distance education is also used to describe any courses that are delivered to students who are not present in the same room using videotapes, television, or correspondence.”

In developed countries like the United States, the impact of teaching and learning with technology, including distance education technology, on student achievement has been investigated in numerous studies. In a review of studies on teaching with technology, Cradler, McNabb, Freeman, and Burchett (2002) indicate that research findings are consistent with a positive impact on achievement in content area courses, higher order thinking and problem-solving, and workforce preparation. In a meta-analysis of 42 research studies that used technology for teaching, Waxman, Lin, and Michko (2003) report an overall effect size of 0.41 for affective, behavioural, and cognitive outcomes. In another study, Cavanaugh, Gillan, Kromrey, Hess, and Blomeyer (2004) conclude that distance education was as effective as traditional, face-to-face instruction. Research to date has shown that students who engage in learning via distance modes such as ICT, typically are just as successful as those who learn through face-to-face instruction (Cavanaugh, et al., 2004). This evidence supports Clark (2003) and Hannum’s (2007) theoretical assertions that technology itself does not produce learning gains; rather it is the pedagogy of the teaching process that matters. While there are calls for higher quality research and for more studies (Abrami & Bernard, 2006; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999), there is evidence to support consideration of distance education as a way to address some of the common problems facing educators in rural environments.

Distance learning has been shown to be an effective way to offer courses to students who are separated by time, space and circumstance; there are, however, a number of factors that limit the use of distance learning. In a study of K-12 educators’ perceptions of barriers to distance learning in United States, Berge and Muilenburg (2003) report increased time commitment, lack of funding, organizational resistance, lack of shared vision for distance education, and lack of strategic planning as the top barriers. In a subsequent factor analytic

study of student perceptions of barriers to distance learning, Muilenburg and Berge (2005) found several factors, notably administrative issues, social interaction, academic skills, technical skills, motivation, time and support, costs and Internet access and technical problems. Their study did not take into account the geographic location of the students nor indicate what portion, if any, may be rural students. Still it is possible, perhaps even likely, that rural students may encounter some of these barriers when taking distance learning courses.

Although distance learning could potentially address some of the issues rural schools face, the extent to which on-line learning is being used in rural communities in developing countries and the barriers that rural communities face are not well documented. Watson and Ryan (2007) reviewed United States policies regarding the use of on-line learning and report that 42 states have significant supplemental or full-time on-line programs. This report indicated that distance learning did allow rural districts to provide access to highly qualified teachers in courses they previously could not offer. Tracing the history of virtual schools, Davis et al. (2007) also noted the recent growth in distance learning in the form of virtual K-12 schools. They indicate the need to prepare teachers to be effective as virtual teachers. Clark (2008) discussed the growth and potential of on-line learning for K-12 schools and noted an increase in the public's approval of high school students earning credits in on-line courses. While there is a sharp growth in distance education use in schools particularly in developed nations like United States (Watson and Ryan, (2007) ), the extent of distance learning using on-line materials in rural communities in Pacific Island countries has rarely been examined.

### **The Distance Learning Centre Project**

The initiation of the DLCP in Solomon Islands is encapsulated by the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (2004) in the *Education Strategic Plan (ESP)2004-2006*. The plan outlines the educational changes and reforms that should be undertaken in the country. The key areas were the provision of basic education services, technical, vocational and further education and the management of the education system. In reforming these key areas, a particular emphasis is placed on making education more relevant and accessible to all Solomon Islanders.

The development of human resources is realized as one of the key drivers in achieving the ESP. Therefore, the need to address the problem of untrained teachers, who are estimated to account for 19% of primary teachers and 16% in Community High Schools (CHS) was targeted as one of the priority areas for immediate action (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2007). The Ministry translated ESP into the Education Sector Investment and Reform Program (ESIRP). The ESIRP specifies the programs and activities which were focused on eight areas:

- Increased access with a target of 2015 for universal access up to Form 3
- Curriculum review and reform
- The introduction of practical and vocational subjects into the secondary curriculum
- Teacher training and development
- Educational materials
- National and provincial planning and educational management
- Infrastructure
- Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE).

Within the policy framework of the ESP and the action plans of the ESIRP, the DLCP in Solomon Islands was conceived. It was perceived that the project has the potential to achieve the objectives of the ESP and the ESIRP particularly improving access to quality education. Given, the importance of the Project it was taken on board by European Union (EU) and New Zealand Aid (NZ Aid) with the focus of delivering education to rural and isolated communities where most people live in Solomon Islands.

Furthermore, there were three main reasons why the Project was perceived as being very cost-effective. Firstly, given the increasing population growth, the Government would find it difficult to finance the cost of education. Secondly, it has been a problem to send untrained teachers for upgrading courses as it is hard to find replacement teachers. Finally, there is a high cost involve in sending people overseas or bringing them to the country's capital (Honiara) for training. It is the cost-benefit analysis and the potential that technology can deliver in accessing education that saw the establishment of nine rural distance learning centres under the DLCP (Figure 1).

### **Developing the Learning Technologies**

Developing technologies that could then support learning in isolated and remote islands of Solomon Islands is a difficult task for technical experts. With the DLCP, before the on-the-ground technologies were developed, the network system was first put in place. A VSAT-based platform was identified as a basic requirement to network the DLCP in Solomon Islands. Solomon Telekom as a sole telecommunication provider in the country was approached to supply VSAT networking services for the DLCP. The company agreed and became a pioneering partner in the project.

### ***Equipping the Centres***

The centres are equipped with solar power supplies, designed to allow an average of 12-14 hours uptime per day. In 2000 and 2001, a rural Internet service called People First Net (PF Net) was able to solar power three rural schools and this is still working well today. This same design is used in the DLCP and incorporates:

- Sealed gel batteries
- Digital controllers with 30-day memory
- 120W solar modules.

The power supply has a net interface allowing PF Net to monitor the battery voltages remotely. Most of the schools have generators that are run in the evenings and these are used with 30A chargers to provide extra input.



Figure 1: Location of the Rural Distance Learning Centres in Solomon Islands

Source: <http://www.peoplefirst.net.sb/dlcp/map.htm>

### ***Learning Technologies Involved***

Each centre is provided with six laptop workstations with the following installed:

- Dual operating systems (Microsoft XP/Vista and Linux/Fedora), providing a degree of redundancy.
- Server/corporate type anti-virus solution
- MS Office Pro and Open Office
- Encarta Reference Library
- MELL (Microsoft) learning libraries for Office software
- Remote access/control (VNC) software
- Audio conferencing tools
- Deep Freeze or similar workstation integrity controllers
- Other systems, resources and applications (Leeming, Pitia, & Ma'ai, 2005).

Each computer has a headset that enables audio conferencing and computer-to-computer voice calls, including conferencing/group calls. According to Leeming, et al.,(2005):

VOIP telephone calls through the public switched telephone network are not allowed under the supply agreement. Laptop computers are preferred due to their lower power consumption. The LAN is wireless, but cables was also provided for back-up. The centres have two or more printing options, including a dot-matrix printer for general use with extremely low per-page printing costs and a quality bubble-jet or laser printer. A scanner was also provided.

**Courses Offered**

As outlined in Table 1, there are 15 courses offered at the rural distance learning centres and are grouped into four categories. The first category is a peace pilot project course which is currently being trialled on the island of Isabel. The second category is in the area of technical and vocational courses. The courses in this category are envisaged to provide the skills needed in generating livelihood in rural villages.

**Table 1: Courses Offered at Present**

Course Categories	Course Title	Course Descriptions
Learning4Peace	Learning4Peace pilot project in Isabel	Learning4Peace is a Commonwealth of Learning program. A project started in February 2009 aimed at building communities of youths and women to network.
Technical and vocational	Kokorako (poultry) Farming in Solomon Islands	This is a course area with resources including manuals, chat and links to help kokorako (poultry) farmers.
	Turtle Conservation	Course created by the Tetepare Dependents Association.
	Introduction to Beekeeping	Introduction to Beekeeping in the Solomon Islands.
One Laptop Per Child-OLPC	Early Childhood Collection	Example ECE materials from Wiki educator.
	Biology for Primary Schools	49 Lesson Plans for Primary Schools from the Wiki educator. This collection is presented for demonstration purposes.
	OLPC Oceania Teacher training	Teacher training resources for the OLPC Oceania trials. These are lesson plans for facilitators of the trials. They will be regularly improved and expanded.

Training	SICHE-Infor Tech	Introduction to computing
	Centre Committee Best Practices	A course on how to manage the operations of a centre effectively.
	Instructional Design	This is an introduction to do instructional design on a written course for adaptation to distance and flexible learning.
	Solomon Islands School Certificate-SISC Mathematics	No course description provided.
	Basic Information Technology (IT) 101	Basic Information Technology (IT) 101 is an introductory course to newbies who have no or little idea of what IT is. Enrolling into this course will give you a good understanding of basic information on IT, its applications and importance to the world of technologies.
	DLCP Monitoring and Reporting procedures	This course is for DLCP Supervisors only. The course will assist supervisors in the proper and effective management and administration of the centres.
	Sky Diving	Learn how to fly
	Moodle Lesson 1	This course helps the reader to have access to and work with moodle in creating a course.
<i>Source: <a href="http://schoolnet.net.sb/courses/index.htm">http://schoolnet.net.sb/courses/index.htm</a></i>		

The third category is concerned with the ‘One Laptop per Child’ (OLPC) program which is specifically targeted to the learning needs of primary school children. The final category consists of short training courses in specific skills and includes computing skills, centre management, sky diving and secondary school curriculum. The courses are aimed at addressing the needs of the different sectors in rural communities.

Apart from the courses offered, the centres are also used by students who are enrolled in the University of the South Pacific distance education courses. This mainly involves using the centres’ internet for research and accessing their on-line materials and using the email to communicate with their tutors and lecturers. The majority of the students in this category are teachers.

### ***Delivering the Courses***

The courses are offered on-line through the project’s course server using on-line synchronous tuition tools. They are the youth knowledge network and the collaborative cyber community network. These two tuition platforms are made available through a partnership arrangement with the National Sun-Yat Sen University in Taiwan. Synchronous tuition tools enable classes to be conducted on-line and all students in a particular course from the centres are on-line and communicating at the same time. The other course delivery tools are the whiteboard,

audio conferencing and chat. In the whiteboard facility each board is allocated to a priority user group. For instance, Board 1 is reserved for School Net management and Board 2 for St. Stephen's College Centre.

## **Issues and Concerns**

The broad objective of DLCP is to offer quality education that is accessible to every rural community. In any innovation, accessibility and quality are important considerations to ensure successful outcomes. For instance, an innovation can be of high quality; however, if it is not accessible it may not achieve its intended purpose. On the other hand, an innovation can be accessible but of poor quality. In the next section, educational and social concerns and other issues as they relate to the DLCP in Solomon Islands are critically examined.

### ***Educational and Social Concern***

Within the learning technology literature some critics stressed the social and educational implications of on-line learning. The two prominent themes are *empowerment* and *access* to education. Rumble (2001) and Thorpe (2002) have debated the advantages and drawbacks of distance education. These debates pointed to the need to introduce on-line learning technologies to address some of the identified shortcomings and to introduce a new paradigm in distance learning (Passerini & Granger, 2000).

Comparing print-based modes of distance learning, it is asserted that on-line learning has the potential to increase interactivity. Goodison (2001) argues that on-line learning interaction empowers student to actively engage in their learning process. However, interaction can only contribute to intellectual development if there is an open relationship between the teachers and the students which is not unnecessarily constrained by structured curriculum or software program. On these grounds, Noble(2002), Drefus (2001) and Cooley (1980) assert that whilst students develop competence at a specific problem-based task via on-line learning, they will never move beyond competency.

Another concern that relates to empowerment and autonomy has implications for the DLCP in Solomon Islands. Firstly, Sahay (2004) point to the need for critical awareness of "who is communicating with whom, how and about what" (p.11). Secondly, the costs and benefits of on-line learning raise the question "whose costs, whose benefits" (Rumble, 2001). Finally, tackling the same issue from the point of view of community interaction, Barab et al. (2003) cited the inherent tension between 'I' and 'we' that underlies community interaction. These writers highlighted the importance of balancing and leveraging on-line learning from the 'inside' (p.237). In this sense, what is valued in the DLCP on-line learning in Solomon Islands must be understood as a fundamental question underlying community and individual empowerment.

It is interesting to further examine the concern of autonomy and empowerment from the perspective of student choice of learning. Sahay (2004) considers that increase use of technology in both on-line and face-to-face teaching gives students little choice in terms of learning preference. In the rural Solomon Islands community, most people would see and touch a computer for the first time through the DLCP. As such, there is a sense of uneasiness and many are 'put off' by the on-line learning environment. This innovation seems to have been forced on the community without really addressing the student learning preferences.

In the light of these conditions, Sahay (2000) argues that students do not have a say in terms of the path they wish their education to take. Similarly, Barnett (1990) alludes to the concern in relation to teaching vocational skills and liberal education on-line. The purpose of such courses is to equip students with appropriate skills and competencies.

Finally, this innovation in on-line learning was seen as a vehicle to increase access to education (Passerini & Granger, 2000; Rumble, 2001). In particular DLCP was targeted as one of the vehicles to meet the millennium development goals (MDGs) of education for all (EFA) by 2015. However, Blass and Davis (2003) contend that on-line learning would not be the panacea to issues of widening participation that it was initially promoted to be. The costs and access to technology are prevalent concerns in on-line learning literature, for instance, Rumble (2001) argues that increasing the 'richness' of on-line materials increases production costs and therefore pushes up the unit costs of courses.

## **Conclusions**

This paper concludes with practical issues and concerns that point to the question: whose learning needs are being addressed in the DLCP initiative? In examining the DLCP, the implicit aim of this paper was to address four major questions as stated in the introduction. These questions are discussed in the body of the paper, however; there are other issues that warrant further discussion to conclude and ascertain whose learning needs are being addressed by the Rural Distance Learning Centres in Solomon Islands.

## ***Adequacy***

Each centre is equipped with six laptops and this would mean that to make on-line learning meaningful only six students at a time would be able to use the learning facilities. On the other hand, if there are many students enrolled in the courses they are likely to use the facilities as a group and each student may not have adequate time to experience the benefits of on-line learning.

## ***Teaching Practical Skills On-line***

There are three technical and vocational courses that are currently offered. These are poultry farming, turtle conservation and bee keeping. These courses demand hands-on practical skills. To what extent are the practical skills in these courses delivered on-line? The aim of the technical and vocational courses is to equip rural people with the skills for their livelihood and how the DLCP has dealt with this issue is not clear and remains one of the concerns that threaten the relevancy of the initiative. If this concern is not addressed, the DLCP will repeat the failure of secondary school and Rural Training Centres (RTC) technical and vocational programs. As reported by Maebuta (2006) the RTC technical and vocational programs lacked practical training and mostly involved students copying notes from the blackboard. This situation is a face-to-face teaching mode so that the transition from theory to practical is more feasible compared to teaching the skills on-line. If these skills are to contribute to generating better livelihood in the rural areas, the on-line teaching materials must be backed up with on-site practical sessions in the centres. The possibility for this to happen depends

on the availability of qualified persons on the ground to ensure that the technical and vocational skills are practically applied in real community projects.

### **Future Sustainability**

The DLCP is being financed by EU and NZAid. This raises another serious issue of future sustainability of the Project. Will the centres be able to sustain themselves after the project life is over? In a struggling economy, future sustainability of this innovation is uncertain. For example, at present, there are many schools in the country that face the problem of inadequate teaching and learning materials. This lack of basic teaching and learning resources includes, for example, chalk, exercise books, and student textbooks. In such scenario how the replacement of solar power, computers and other learning software would be financed by the centres a few years down the line? By that time the cost of such equipment and software will be expensive.

### **Follow up Program**

As the Project is being implemented it is crucial that the centres must evaluate their courses internally to determine the level of effectiveness and efficiency of the running of the on-line courses. The evaluation should focus on how the graduates are utilising their skills in their local community. The centres, for example, should keep records of graduates so that ongoing development can be made. Furthermore, the follow-up of the graduates is important as this process will provide information concerning the extent to which the objectives set out by DLCP have been achieved. Furthermore, feedback could improve the courses and programs of the centres.

### **Further Research**

This paper has provided an insight into the development of on-line learning in the distance learning centres in Solomon Islands. The issues examined in this paper have provided a foundation for further research development into the issues that were identified. For example, some research issues and questions that should be considered include:

- What types of barriers exist to the integration of on-line learning into the rural distance learning centres in ?
- How satisfied are rural communities with the distance learning centres?
- How well prepared are students in rural communities to take on-line courses?

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### List of Acronyms

CHS: Community High School  
DLCP: Distance Learning Centres Project  
EFA: Education for All  
EU: European Union  
ESIRP: Education Sector Investment and Reform Program  
ESP: Education Strategic Plan  
MEHRD: Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development  
MDG: Millennium Development Goals  
OLPC: One Laptop per Child  
PF Net: People First Net  
NZ Aid: New Zealand Aid  
RTC: Rural Training Centre  
SICHE: Solomon Islands College of Higher Education

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