

ODL REFRESHER COURSE FOR AUDITORS

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The objective of this assignment is to present some of the points being considered in planning an ODL Refresher Course for Auditors. Based on Rowntree (1999), messages from Tony's group (1999) and set books, it seeks to describe aspects of Auditors as learners (profile, expectations, needs, motivations, fears, etc) as well as to identify some critical aspects with implications on course design.

For a clearer understanding of these considerations this assignment begins with a description of the context within which the Refresher Course for Auditors will be developed.

CONTEXT

From the 70s Brazil's electric power industry has been a model of a state-managed industry. Most personnel training were provided by the holding company throughout the entire industry. Standardised face-to-face programs were provided and centralised in the south-central region, the country's most developed area. Beginning in 1996, the neo-liberal influence led to a process of privatisation, downsizing and budget restraints that directly affected conventional ways of training. As a result major and resource-rich companies began to develop their own training courses. On the other hand, companies whose reduced staff does not justify the design of their own courses and/or those companies with scant resources based in the north and north-east region continue to rely on the holding company to provide courses to their employees, principally refresher distance courses.

It is in the latter companies that Auditors that is prospective learners are found. And it is in order to assist the holding company sponsoring this undertaking that the ODL Refresher course for Auditors is being considered.

KNOWING THE AUDITOR-LEARNERS

Rowntree (1999a) says "the logical starting point for implementing ODL must be to ask what we know about our intended or intending learners". As a result in an attempt to characterise the target public for which the refresher course for Auditors is being prepared, Lukowiecki (1999) presents the following report.

Demographic Factors

My learners are adults who work as Auditors or Technical Assistants in different electric power companies scattered throughout Brazil. They are Brazilians, of both sexes, age between 25 and 55 years, and most live with their families in urban centres relatively close to their workplace.

Classes are estimated to have about 15 students.

Motivation

The Auditors are aware that they have to update their skills and knowledge continuously, if they are to compete in the market. Furthermore, they know that even though they are not obligated, their companies expect them to undertake courses so as to update their expertise and, consequently, improve their productivity and the quality of their work.

Despite their motivation, Auditors fear that the programs may require many hours of study which could clash with their job responsibilities and family life.

Learning Factors

All Auditors are University graduates in different subjects and have been familiar in auditing practices for at least two years.

As 'activists and pragmatists' (Honey and Mumford, 1986), these learners reject long-duration, theoretical courses that require a large amount of reading. They don't have the habit of reading books and hate academic texts, especially when written in a foreign language. For them, a good course is a useful and practical course, full of examples, illustrations, simulations, and case studies.

Although the Auditors know little of DL, they are predisposed to undertake distance courses as they know that the conventional training are becoming unfeasible.

Resource Factors

In addition to paying the course fees, companies agree to let their Auditors take time off to study, as well as provide tutors for assisting learners.

Auditors have access in their companies to PCs which most use merely as word processors. The use of email is a recent practice but it is on the increase.

TIME AND USEFULNESS: CRITICAL FACTORS

Without entering into a discussion on the merits of learning theories for adults there is no doubt that both the time devoted to studies and the usage of the

learning content differs a great deal for students enrolled formally in courses and those workers who also study. Evans (1994) says that for the former study is one of the roles of their lives whereas for the latter study is part of another role such as being company staff engaged in a training workshop.

Time

The time factor may be analysed from two perspectives: time as a measurable element and a pacing element – both important within an ODL context.

Time as a measurable element may be illustrated by a quote from Moore and Kearsley (1996) “for an adult ... cost must be measured not only in dollars but perhaps even more important in time and in work that will be added to existing effort required by the adult’s employment and family responsibilities”. Referring to extracurricular concerns and completion of DE courses those authors state “in most all cases, job or family considerations take priority over distance learning requirements”.

The Auditors know that even if the companies allow them to study during office time, once they are in their offices, they will be interrupted to attend some job requirement. Since submission to routine prevails over the self-discipline required to comply with a study program, learners will likely relegate studying to a second plane. In some cases, they may use the time to spend with their families or to rest to the detriment of their studies. So, the challenge lies in designing an ODL course what will allow Auditors to study with the least possible degree of conflict or discomfort without lowering course standards. To this end things such as short-duration courses, distribution of course contents in modules, division of modules in small learning units, short and easy texts, and a moderate weekly learning load seem to be the most appropriate.

As for pacing study-time the ODL course is likewise appropriate in that it allows individual Auditors to study at a pace that best suit them. However, the design of course has to take into consideration that the Auditors have a traditional learning culture, called by Conway (1997) ‘Lecture-Based’, rather than the ‘Learner-centred’ which requires greater self-control of time. By the same taken, since Auditors are not used to participating in online discussions, asynchronous discussions seem to be the most appropriate and useful way to help establish this habit and administer the time to study. So, the challenge in designing the course is to find the right share for this type of communication *vis-à-vis* communication made through ways already known by the learners such as, for example, the telephone.

Usefulness

Among several propositions on adult distance learning made by Knowles (1978) two of them best illustrate this statement: a) “While children trust the teacher to define course content, adults need to define it for themselves, or at

least to be persuaded that the content is relevant to their needs”; b) “Children must acquire a lot of information as the basis of life in the future, for adults the future is now; they have a basis of information and see learning as necessary for using it in solving problems in the present”.

In fact, Auditors accumulate considerable experience throughout their lives, including work related to the subject in question, and this ‘knowledge which is not found in books’ should be used to advantage in designing the course by providing practical examples, students’ reports, etc. To leave these things out would be a waste and would impoverish the course.

On the other hand if Auditors feel that the course is not helping to improve their professional performance or that what they are learning is too academic and of little relevance to their work, they may complete the course but certainly it will have a negative influence on next students carrying the course in failure.

CONCLUSION

It seems to be no doubt that an ODL course is a better way of updating Auditors in small and wanting electric power companies currently operating in Brazil. However, an ODL course of this nature ought to take into consideration at least the following points:

1. Auditors have to find a time-slot in their already heavy agenda (devoted mostly to work and family, and very little or no time for leisure) to complete the course. As a result courses should be of short duration, including light and agreeable activities without impairing the quality of learning.
2. The model learning learners are used to is ‘Lecture-Based’ and not ‘Learner-Centred’. As a consequence, the course should be developed to seek innovated way for learners to administer their study time and communicate among themselves, in such a way that present culture is modified and not affronted.
3. The majority of Auditors have enough professional experience and the course design should include this by way of practical examples and/or reports that illustrate the theoretical contents.

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