

Chapter 15

The Pacific Open Learning Health Net: Providing Health Education in the Pacific

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ABSTRACT

Online learning offers the opportunity for health workers to improve their knowledge and skills while serving in remote locations. Through online continuing professional development, they are able to stay abreast of the latest developments in medicine. Convenient Internet access also provides the opportunity for health professionals to participate with the global medical community in research and consult with both peers and experts from around the world. This chapter describes the experiences of the Pacific Open Learning Health Net (POLHN) in providing online, face-to-face, and blended professional education to health professionals in 12 developing Pacific island countries. The chapter reviews the establishment of learning centers with Internet access in hospitals, nursing schools, and health centers.

INTRODUCTION

Access to the Internet has removed the geographical barriers preventing students from attending courses unavailable in their local areas. Transnational distance learning has also introduced competition for students, removing the geographical monopoly some academic institutions previously enjoyed. However, successful transnational distance learning programs require a student-centered approach that allows for modifications to both

the curriculum and delivery to meet the needs of students.

One of the most successful online learning programs for professionals has been that of the University of Phoenix (UoP), a for-profit university in the United States. Part of this university's success has been due to excellent market analysis, providing programs that meet these needs, excellent marketing, viewing the student as a customer and providing excellent customer service, and developing and delivering online courses that

incorporate best practices in online learning. UoP is also very visible, having established campuses throughout the U.S. These campuses provide UoP with the capability to deliver online, blended and face-to-face courses.

Can the concepts applied by UoP to the U.S. market work in a transnational distance-learning environment? This chapter attempts to answer that question by examining the POLHN project, which serves a dozen small Pacific island developing countries.

Developing and delivering courses to students who have limited computer literacy, and who come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds requires a student-centered focus. Courses created for developed countries are not always appropriate for the context of the Pacific islands. Students may have difficulty relating to the content, especially if examples are taken from completely foreign cultures. Since English is a second language for most students in this region, online courses must be designed for ESL populations and incorporate a high degree of interactivity.

Unfortunately, some academic institutions have not yet adopted a student-centered approach. The need to satisfy governments, donors, and faculty often interferes with the ability of the institution to focus on the student. In addition, in many institutions in the region a majority of faculty has not been trained in how to incorporate a student-centered approach in course design and delivery.

The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) challenges in the region also inhibit a student-centered approach, such as videoconferencing. These challenges may require developing multiple ways of delivering content, participating with other students, submitting assignments, and sitting for examinations.

This chapter provides an example of a program that has been able to meet a need and provide transnational distance learning, despite the challenges associated with developing and delivering courses in low-resource settings and across cultures.

BACKGROUND

Access to continuing professional development of health workers in Pacific Island countries has been limited due to reliance on face-to-face methods of training. As discussed in Chapter 4, the remoteness of the islands makes regularly scheduled face-to-face training very expensive.

Even in countries where health professionals had access to some continuing education, there was little evidence of participation. Koleth (2006) surveyed health workers in three major cities in Fiji in 2006. He reported that only 54% of health workers in those three cities had ever engaged in any continuing education after receiving their degree or diploma. This figure is especially significant considering continuing education was defined as attending even one hour of a presentation or reading a journal.

However, the opportunity for health workforce to engage in continuing education directly impacts their ability to improve health services to Pacific islanders. In past decades, face-to-face teaching was the only option because Internet cost was too high, bandwidth too small, and access too limited. That has now changed. The cost of travel is on the increase while the cost of Internet continues to decrease. Online learning seems the most promising future direction for health-worker training in the Pacific.

The 12 developing Pacific Island countries (PICs) covered by The Pacific Open Learning Health Net (POLHN) spreads across 33 million square kilometers of ocean, an area more than three times the size of Europe. Most of the PICs are made up of small islands separated by vast distances of ocean. With the exception of Nauru, Niue and Pitcairn, all Pacific island countries and areas are made up of several or many islands. Some countries span a distance of several thousand kilometers. Kiribati for example stretches 5000 kilometers across the central-western Pacific.

The primary methods of providing continuing education in the region have been face-to-

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