

# **Design and implementation of a one week face-to-face course to prepare participants in Mozambique for an online distance training course.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper describes a one week face-to-face training course which took place at the Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo to prepare participants for a subsequent nine-week online distance training course run by CIARIS/ILO-STEP, an international organization working in the area of Social Inclusion. It focuses on the selection, design and implementation of course activities and includes a brief description of their theoretical underpinning.

## **KEYWORDS**

face-to-face; online training; sense of community; community of practice; social inclusion.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Background**

The course participants were made up of a mix of experienced practitioners in the field of Social Inclusion working for Mozambican NGOs and third and fourth year university students completing degree courses in a variety of fields. The face-to-face (f2f) course was designed and facilitated by the writer, and after the week in Maputo, the following nine weeks I was to continue as facilitator, working online from my base in Portugal. The staff of the Centre for African Studies of the Eduardo Mondlane University would liaise with course participants, organize two group meetings and help with web-access issues where necessary. As the online component was designed around a situated learning, knowledge-sharing philosophy, the initial f2f component was expected to lay the groundwork for successful participation on the online course which would begin immediately afterwards. To this end it was important to prepare participants for an autonomous approach to learning and to clarify the roles of facilitator and participant especially in so far as they differed from those of trainer and trainee in more traditional courses. Equally it was important to prepare participants with little or no experience of online learning and with limited internet access, to be able to navigate the Moodle-based course space successfully and to realize their potential as online learners. Apart from one participant who had previously completed an online course, the other sixteen had not had previous experience of online learning. All however were familiar with basic word-processing, email and web-browsing techniques.

In addition it was hoped that the training would contribute to the formation of a community of practice (CoP) of Lusophone practitioners in the Social Inclusion field. For this reason, it was considered important to foster a spirit of community on both the f2f and online components of the training and to apply a CoP approach in the planning and design of the f2f activities.

Assessment would be based on learner electronic portfolios to be handed in at the end of the online course, a new technique for all participants, and it would be important to clarify the concept and get people started on the writing process during the f2f component.

### **1.2 Community of Practice**

Etienne Wenger focuses on three elements in the growth of a CoP: Domain, Practice and Community (Wenger 2006).

Domain: as the course was conceived for actors with a shared domain of interest in social inclusion in Mozambique, it was decided that student candidates would be accepted on the course only if they had already acquired experience in the field. This gave us a mix of about 40% of participants with considerable professional experience and 60% students with some experience, either in voluntary associations or job placement.

Practice: To develop a degree of shared practice within the group (most of whom had not met previously) a mixture of collaborative and individual activities would be included.

Community: In addition to collaborative group activities, what Wenger refers to as reification would be encouraged in the form of shared photos of each day of the course (visible online next day) and shared participant stories which would be accessible online (Wenger 1998).

### 1. 3 Sense of Community

Rovai has proposed that a sense of learner community may be viewed as consisting of four related dimensions: spirit, trust, interaction, and commonality of learning expectations and goals (Rovai 2002) and he presents evidence from US universities that a combination of f2f and online learning strategies can be more effective in developing this sense than graduate courses than either completely f2f or completely online (Rovai 2004). With this in mind, the design of this f2f component would include elements considered important in encouraging collaborative participation in online courses such as collaborative tasks, concrete task outcomes and building on the experience of each participant (Williams, 2006; Rovai 2002).

## 2. PROCEDURE

The activities were organized over the 5 days of the course as follows:

Table 1.

Day	Activity	Description and Observations
1	Powerpoint presentation on CIARIS /ILO (sponsoring organization)	Facilitator presentation
1	Use of Google to research web resources and the CIARIS website	Individual and pairs
1	Writing and exchanging stories of memorable learning moments in our lives	Individual and pairs
2	Accessing the online space: login and exploration of the Moodle space	Individual
2	“Three little words” – getting to know you, online activity	Individual and inter-individual
2	Comparing our stories of learning moments, looking for common aspects – small group discussion and then plenary reporting using flipchart presentations	Groups Groups reporting to Plenary Facilitator summarized
2	Presentation on course philosophy: participant and facilitator versus trainer and trainees, learning theories	Facilitator presentation
3	Personal reflections of days 1 and 2: online Blog Room	Individual

3	“What is Social Exclusion?” How to explain the concept to people in rural areas with little formal schooling.	Group preparation for plenary presentation; some prepared posters but the most vivid presentation came from a group who acted out a series of encounters between excluded individuals and a self-important local official in a rural area.
3	Using Mindmaps to organise and represent our ideas about Social Inclusion/Exclusion	Facilitator presentation – follow-up to previous activity
3	Completing an online survey and analysing the results	Individual
4	Organization of the forthcoming online course – exploring online	Individual
4	Portfolio organisation: analysing 3 examples from a different course;	Pairs
4	Portfolio exercise: deciding the best section of a portfolio (Reflections, Productions, Artifacts and Affirmations) to place 8 sample entries	Individual, pairs, whole group
4	“My experience in a Social Inclusion Project”: what went well, less well, what surprised me and what I would do differently in the future.	Prepared individually and presented to the whole group to comment on the relationships between the stories and the course materials.
5	Discussion on the composition of the (tutor-assigned) groups for the first weeks of the online course;	Whole group
5	Writing up reflections for days 3,4,5 of the course to date.	Individual, online
5	Tips for working online (prepare texts offline in Word, use a Portuguese spellchecker; work at the portfolio “little and often” and keep a copy offline)	Facilitator presentation
5	Web tools – pdf converters, Moodle FAQ in Portuguese, Mindmap software	Facilitator presentation
5	Final photo session	Whole group

### 3. RESULTS

The participants were quick to adapt to the methodology employed in the f2f sessions and in spite of numerous initial IT-related problems, rapidly familiarized themselves with the Moodle online course space and helped each other complete the online tasks.

Horácio, an experienced practitioner commented: “The first day of class was both tense and filled with expectation, as was to be expected, as each one of us was really keen to know everything possible about our course. And one of the main expectations I noted in all the participants was to be presented with a facilitator who would be our main orator and that we would be vessels to receive the prepared content from him. Our mistake! The facilitator got things underway by telling us that the course would be in interactive in nature and everybody’s opinion would be valid.”

Waldemar, an NGO worker with a background in journalism wrote: “After the “shock” of our initial encounter with the facilitator’s methodological approach, I felt an enormous expectation growing in me

because this methodology was to demand a level of active and intensive participation which, to tell the truth, was outside what I had been expecting for a training course. In other words, this would be a new type of course, at least for our country, and not simply based on the more traditional learning system where we end the course having received pre-established conclusions about what to do in specific social exclusion contexts.

This new approach was to generate high expectations and make me keen to see where all this was going to take us and at the same time it presented me with a challenge: first get to grips with the methodology and then make use of it to learn the course content.” (Both texts extracted with permission from participant portfolios and translated from Portuguese by the author)

There was a generally high level of participation on the subsequent 9-week online course and a relatively high completion rate as can be seen from table 2. The overall performance of the participants on the subsequent online courses was considered very satisfactory by the sponsoring organization and the quality of the portfolios given in was considered very high. The most active participants were selected to take part in a 4-week online course where they trained as online facilitators and went on to prepare their own Moodle spaces for future courses at local level.

Table 2

Course	Strategies for the Combat of Social Exclusion	Strategies for the Combat of Social Exclusion	Online Facilitator Training
Duration	1 week face to face	9 weeks online	4 weeks online
initial no. participants	17	15	8
presented portfolios in progress		15	
presented final portfolios		13	5

## 4. COMMENTARY

### 4.1 Online course preparation

Given the many examples in the literature of high dropout rates for online courses (Carr 2000) the relatively high course completion figure (76% of those who started the f2f course representing 87% of those who actually started the online course) for this 10-week course suggest that the f2f component served its purpose in preparing for effective online participation. This is supported by the overall results achieved on the online course and by comments in the participant portfolios.

### 4.2 Sense of Community

During the online course, a strong group spirit was noticeable among participants which helped people to maintain their involvement over the nine weeks and to avoid dropping out when other pressures arose as they inevitably do in this kind of situation: three bouts of malaria, three job changes, various trips up-country or to South Africa which meant no Net access, end of year and end of course exams and two personal computer hard-disk crashes are examples of the challenges faced by participants during the period in question.

### 4.3 Community of Practice

The participants have continued to meet up after the training ended (usually f2f because, although the Moodle course space remains open, many of them do not now have regular internet access), have since participated actively as a group in a national conference of NGOs working in Mozambique and have drawn up project proposals to organize and facilitate similar courses themselves in the field of Social Inclusion in Maputo which with the support of national and international organizations are expected to get underway early in 2007.

CIARIS/ILO, the sponsoring organization, is currently looking at ways of enabling and supporting the growth of a CoP which would include these course participants and other interested practitioners in Lusophone Africa and Portugal.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The results related here are essentially anecdotal and although by the nature of this type of course a rigorous quantitative assessment is not easy to apply (see for example comments in Eastwood, 2004) it would be valuable to apply an instrument to measure community spirit such as the Sense of Classroom Community Index (Rovai 2002) in future courses.

Practical limitations on this combination of f2f and distance learning arise from the logistical and financial problems involved in sending an experienced facilitator from Europe to Africa to provide a week's training. Ways of building up online experience in local trainers to facilitate local courses working in tandem with an experienced European mentor using online technology including asynchronous collaboration and video conferencing are currently being explored.

This type of f2f preparation course can have a valuable role to play in preparing online course participants who have had little previous access to online learning and community, particularly in locations like the Lusophone African countries.

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