THE ONLINE MASTER OF DISTANCE EDUCATION (MDE) - AN INTERNATIONAL PROGRAM FOR QUALIFICATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONALS

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Some facts about the online Master of Distance Education program

The MDE program began in January, 2000. It is a joint collaborative program between Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg in Germany and University of Maryland University College (UMUC) in Maryland, USA. At the beginning of its third year, the MDE has surpassed its 1000th course enrollment from approximately 300 active students in the program (enrolled in a course within the last 3 terms).

The Master of Distance Education degree program has formal approval by the Maryland Higher Education Commission. The first Certificate graduates were awarded in March, 2001 and the first Master's degree earned in December, 2001.

There are 15 active faculty members and 8 distinguished guest faculty members actually teaching the various online courses. International faculty and visiting experts come from Australia, Canada, Germany, Great Britain, Israel, Mexico, Sweden, and the U.S. (Florida, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and Virginia).

The Master of Distance Education is designed to qualify the present and future managers of distance education. Given that distance education - and e-learning - have expanded so radically in the past few years, in both the public and private education, as well as training sectors, the program needs to train a multitude of new managers and future leaders required in this field. These managers, in particular, need to be trained as leaders, since they will be required to be active advocates for distance education and training in their organizations and will need to manage significant change processes that will affect the entire organization.

The transition from the Virtual Seminar to the online Master of Distance Education program

The development of the Master of Distance Education (MDE) program began in 1995, when the author and Eugene Rubin, at that time Director of the Office for Instructional Design at the University of Maryland University College/USA conceptualized a virtual seminar for professional development in distance education to address two critical needs:

- The need for faculty and administrator training programs in which new distance education faculty and administrators can develop a broader perspective of the general foundations of distance education and can learn critical knowledge and skills in the field.
- The need for a global perspective among distance education faculty and administrators so that they can benefit from the knowledge of how other institutions approach distance education and solve problems, particularly in cross-cultural contexts.

The Virtual Seminar was offered in 1997 as a successful experiment, and in 1998 two further Virtual Seminars were run on a self-supporting basis. The three Virtual Seminars attracted 127 faculty and distance education administrators from 24 different countries. Faculty, as well as most of the participants, experienced for their first time a virtual seminar, organized as an asynchronous communication process in an online learning environment.(Bernath & Rubin 1999a, 1999b, and 2001; Fritsch 1998) The most remarkable experiences bear noting:

- *Team-teaching across time-zones*
  The online learning environment and the asynchronous mode of communication in the Virtual

Seminar allowed team-teaching of the two seminar leaders across time zones. The seminar leaders planned and executed the seminar from their respective home universities across the Atlantic. This, in fact, turned out to be one of the hidden objectives of the seminar; to test whether this kind of Internet collaboration was feasible.

- *Knowledge building communities*
The Virtual Seminars featured a "visiting expert" model, a unique opportunity to interact with distinguished scholars and practitioners like Börje Holmberg (Lund/Sweden), Otto Peters (Hagen/Germany), Gary Miller (University Park/USA), and Tony Bates (Vancouver/Canada) for live interaction with the participants during an assigned period of time within the syllabus of the Virtual Seminar.
Otto Peters observed that the seminar appeared to be a virtual knowledge building community (Peters 1998). While this is not a new concept in the literature about computer-mediated communication, Peters' observation summed up quite well the experience of most of the participants involved in the seminars. Each seminar was a community in that the participants met, talked, agreed, sometime strongly disagreed, sympathized, empathized, and formed relationships (several of which have lasted beyond the end of the seminars). And like other types of communities, each seminar was different from the others. Each had its own "feel", its own pace, group dynamics and its own emphasizes on content matters.

- *The cross-cultural dialogue*
Another goal of the Virtual Seminar was to enable a cross-cultural sharing of experiences, ideas and opinions from participants from all over the world. This was deemed to be a potential positive outcome because
a. distance education occurred in some manner in almost all countries of the world and in a wide variety of ways, and using a variety of levels of technology;
b. distance education was increasingly becoming a world-wide enterprise in that courses became capable of being delivered almost anywhere in the world; and
c. the cultural and regional bias that each participant brought to the discussion would result in a broader and deeper learning.
With participants from 24 countries of origin the three seminar experiences definitely supported the above supposition that the cross-cultural aspects of the seminar would result in positive outcomes. By being globally accessible via the Internet, the content and interaction allowed participants to differentiate and generalize across cultural borders and among the diverse practices within the field of distance education. It gave depth to the learning and forced the participants to think beyond their own cultural and environmental constraints. Not only was a broad variety of opinion expressed, but often these opinions prompted discussion that reflected a more comprehensive analysis and understanding of critical issues.

- *New interpretations of "activity" in a virtual seminar*
In many respects the communication processes in the Virtual Seminars appeared to be new and unknown for most of the participants at that time. From various points of view the "activity" of participants in a virtual seminar became a matter of initial research.
The notion of "witness learning" was introduced by the external evaluator (Fritsch 1998) to interpret positive evaluation results of participants with low or no visible activity levels and lead to further studies on the "invisible learner" (Beaudoin in: Bernath & Rubin 2002) to better understand learner activities that remain behind the screen.
The notion of the "ripple effect" (Bernath) was introduced to better understand a specific characteristic of asynchronous communication, in which postings seem to be much like throwing a stone into the water (the incoming messages) and seeing ripples expand outward in each receipients head (pondering on the content of the message). In asynchronous seminar discussions one can „work" on the answer to be given. This pondering allows one to react whenever you feel ready to do so; to go in-depth and raise new ideas and notions in the seminar. (Bernath & Rubin 2001)

- *The volume of interaction*
By almost any standard, all participants of the three Virtual Seminars experienced that the sheer volume of the interaction in the Virtual Seminars was formidable. The data from the first seminar showed that the average length of a comment posted by a participant to the discussions during the weeks with a "visiting expert" was 187 words (with a range of 76

to 477 words), which fills half of a typical single spaced typewritten page that holds about 350 words. Although each participant contributed only an average of one comment in each of the ten weeks, which at a glance seems to represent only a very small amount of activity, yet these modest amounts of postings, when multiplied by 43 participants with their visible activity in ten weeks, resulted in over 66,000 words and an equivalent of more than 160 typewritten pages. The empirical data clearly show how online activity can be overwhelming to both the teacher and the student.

Consequently, all participants in an asynchronous virtual seminar need to develop new ways and means to manage such an unknown flow and volume of written communication. Also, our data certainly suggested that 40+ participants may be too many for the type of a virtual seminar with an emphasize on teacher-student and student-student interaction. To accomplish this on a large scale (thousands of participants) it would require a significant infrastructure.

Conclusions from the Virtual Seminar

Based on the overall positive and successful experience, one of the most important outcomes of the Virtual Seminar was the joint decision of the two seminar leaders and their respective institutions, the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) and Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, to pursue the design, development and delivery of a Master of Distance Education degree. The decision came directly from the original intent to develop means to train faculty and administrators in the area of distance education.

We realized that the Virtual Seminar just barely touched upon many of the important issues in the field and did not cover much of the knowledge and skills necessary for a qualified practitioner. It was, in fact, a successful foundation for further studies. At this point - by the end of 1998 - we needed to make a decision. Do we leave it as it is and possisbly continue to offer the Virtual Seminar or do we further invest our time and energies to expand the concept of a comprehensive professional training in distance education in light of the new technologies, the emerging market and growing importance of distance education worldwide. (Bernath 1996)

The formalization of the partnership

The Virtual Seminar allowed a cooperation between directors of their institutions acting within their respective areas of responsibilities. Once the planning aimed at the MDE, the relationship between the institutions needed to be addressed. Knowing that institutional agreements often are difficult and complicated, it was felt that a successful collaboration needed to be straightforwarded and to be built on a feeling of trust and in a win-win environment. Since the personal working relationship was already in existence as a result of the Virtual Seminar, what remained was the negotiation of a simple yet fair set of terms. It was agreed that UMUC would be the degree-granting institution with Oldenburg as a partner contributing a certificate and courses within this degree. Furthermore UMUC would be responsible for all of the student administration as well as for the learning management system/web-based delivery system. Each institution would develop its respective courses and would hire and manage its respective faculty. It was further agreed that course and faculty development would be a matter of shared responsibility.

The online Master of Distance Education (OMDE) program

In September of 1999 the online MDE (OMDE) program was officially launched, and in January 2000 the program was started with the Foundations of Distance Education course, which is now required as the first course a student should take in the MDE program. It was agreed that the pace of development would proceed according to the needs of the initial students. Since the program was aimed at a working adult population it was assumed that most students would not take more than two courses per term. This is based upon UMUC's experience in other graduate programs.

Course development

The content and the design of the Virtual Seminar became the basis for the initial Foundation of Distance Education course in the Master's program. We planned to continue the team teaching model and to continue to use a somewhat modified expert guided structure. However, the Foundations course

needed some additional development in order to make it appropriate for inclusion into a graduate program. It was necessary to add assessments and to extend the content to fit a 15-week term. Furthermore the target population expanded, so that the program served a broader constituency including professionals who involved in the distance education enterprise within the educational business, government, and not-for profit sectors.

The development model for most of the courses of the MDE required a more up-front materials, activities and assessment development. This is for two reasons: 1. The program and disciplinary area lacks a pool of reliable, long-term adjunct faculty. 2. The potential pool of qualified faculty for this degree is spread out across the world.

Goals and objectives of the program

Students, who successfully complete the Master's degree shall be able to:

- "Understand and critique the broader policy and social issues that arise from using distance education and technology-based learning.
- Plan and manage distance education and training courses, programs, departments and organizations.
- Design, develop and deliver high quality distance education and training in ways that reflect a variety of different approaches to teaching and learning.
- Select and use technologies on the basis of their differing educational and operational characteristics.
- Evaluate and conduct research on distance education and training issues, and disseminate the results.
- Collaborate and network with other distance education professionals around the world.
- Cost and budget distance education development and delivery systems.
- Understand, from a learner's perspective, what it means to engage in distance and technology-mediated learning." (MHEC Proposal 1999)

The courses of the MDE program

Core courses

OMDE 601 Foundations of Distance Education - The course was developed by Ulrich Bernath (Germany) and Eugene Rubin (U.S.) in collaboration with Börje Holmberg (Sweden) and Otto Peters (Germany). It is now being taught in multiple sections by a team of faculty with Ulrich Bernath, Thomas Hülsmann, and Michael Beaudoin (U.S.), and visiting experts Börje Holmberg, Otto Peters, and Michael Moore (U.S.).

OMDE 602 Distance Education Systems - This course was developed and is taught by Eugene Rubin. It was also taught in Fall 2001 by Yolanda Gayol (Mexico/U.S.).

OMDE 603 Technology in Distance Education - This course was developed and is taught by Judy Roberts (Canada).

OMDE 604 The Management of Distance Education - This course was developed and is taught by Eugene Rubin and Jim Gelatt (U.S.).

OMDE 605 New and Emerging Media in Distance Education - The course was developed by Joachim Hasebrook (Germany) and is taught by Joachim Hasebrook and Michael Romeis (Germany).

OMDE 606 The Economics of Distance Education - This course was developed by Thomas Hülsmann. It is taught by Thomas Hülsmann with visiting experts Greville Rumble (U.K.) and Tony Bates (Canada).

OMDE 607 Instructional Design and Course Development in Distance Education - This course was developed and is taught by Eugene Rubin and Inez Giles (U.S.). It will also be taught from Fall 2002 by Som Naidu (Australia).

Elective courses (students choose four)

OMDE 611 Issues in the Delivery of Library Services to Distance Students - This course was developed is taught by Ilene Frank (U.S.).

OMDE 614 Intellectual Property and Copyright - This course was developed and is taught by Kim Bonner (U.S.).

OMDE 621 Training at a Distance - This course was developed and is taught by Greg Kearsley (U.S.).

OMDE 622 The Business of Distance Education - This course was developed and is taught by Eugene Rubin (U.S.).

OMDE 623 Web-Based Learning and Teaching and The Virtual University – This course was developed and is taught by Yolanda Gayol (Mexico/U.S.)

OMDE 624 Student Support in Distance Education - This course was developed by Jane Brindley (Canada) and Alan Tait (UK). It is taught by Jane Brindley.

OMDE 625 National and International Policies for Distance Education in Developing Countries - This course was developed and is taught by Thomas Hülsmann in collaboration with Hilary Perraton (England).

OMDE 626 Technologies for Distance Education in Developing Countries - The course is under development by Thomas Hülsmann.

OMDE 631 Advanced Technology in DE I: Synchronous Learning Systems - This course was developed and is taught by Gila Kurtz (Israel).

OMDE 632 Advanced Technology in DE II: Asynchronous Learning Systems – This course is under development by Rob Sapp (U.S.)

Capstone (required)

OMDE 690 Distance Education Portfolio and Project - This course was developed and will be taught by Eugene Rubin and Ulrich Bernath.

Further course development

Additional courses are still under development. Syllabi for the MDE courses that have already been developed in the program are available at the following URL address: http://www.info.umuc.edu/mde.

Aspects of program success

As one of very few graduate programs of its type in the world, the MDE has provided unprecedented access to professionals who want to pursue graduate-level work in this field. The program has the added benefit of bridging the resources, faculty, and expertise of two partnering higher education institutions in an international context. Most graduate students do not have opportunities for exposure to broader perspectives provided through courses from two different universities located on two different continents.

The asynchronous format of this program itself lends to the recruitment of a diverse student body in terms of geographic location, career field, academic background, and professional aspirations. MDE students work in sectors such as small businesses, corporations, government agencies, not-for-profit organizations, colleges and universities, K-12 schools, and the military. The program has proven to appeal to students in diverse fields and at different stages in their careers. While many students have had extensive experiences in the field of distance education, others are looking to move into this field. Many students are working in organizations that could be described as "virtual" in focus, while others are in ones that have begun to use technology more recently.

In light of the characteristics of the MDE student population, UMUC and Oldenburg have recognized the importance of providing opportunities for professional networking and career development. In November 2000, a well-attended get-together was held for MDE students and faculty at UMUC's campus in Adelphi, Maryland. For most students, this represented their first opportunity to meet their program colleagues and faculty members face-to-face. In March 2001, MDE students were invited and eight of them funded by Nokia to attend a Mobile Learning Workshop held at Oldenburg University. This event was part of pre-conference workshops to the 20th ICDE World Conference in Germany, where another workshop provided participants with the opportunity to review the first year of the MDE program..

Building on the model of the MDE, UMUC and Oldenburg have recently initiated several related outreach efforts in the field of distance education, including the following:

- From April through June 2001, Oldenburg's Center for Distance Education in collaboration with UMUC provided a seven-week online course titled "Essentials of Online Learning" for Nokia (Finland) HRD staff using WebTycho. Nokia's manager from the New Learning Solutions department has decided to continue offering this course for their HRD staff members. A second course has been offered in Fall 2001.

- To date have been three institutions – one in Asia, another in South America, and another in Europe – all of whom are respected distance education institutions, which have approached the MDE to become potential partners
- The World Bank Institute has negotiated with Oldenburg's Center for Distance Education to become a program partner for its Global Development Learning Network (GDLN) to deliver virtual seminars for professional development on "Distance Education in Developing Countries," which is closely connected with the content in OMDE 625 and OMDE 626 and also in other subject areas.

Preliminary conclusions

Both UMUC and Oldenburg have benefited substantially from the implementation of the Master of Distance Education. MDE students and faculty are making important contributions to the field by positioning the instructional, technological, societal, and management-oriented aspects of distance education into a broader international context for consideration. A publication with extensive reflections on first experiences in the MDE is under preparation. (Bernath & Rubin 2002)

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