

Experience with a 'social model' of capacity building: the Peoples-uni.

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Abstract

Background. Taking advantage of societal trends involving the 'third sector', a social model of philanthropy, and the open source software and educational resource movements, provides the opportunity for of online education for capacity building at low cost. The Peoples Open Access Education Initiative, Peoples-uni, aims to help build Public Health capacity in this way, and this paper describes it evolution.

Methods. The development of the Peoples-uni has involved the creation of an administrative infrastructure, calls for and identification of volunteers, development of both the ICT infrastructure and course content, and identification of students and course delivery to them. A pilot course module was offered for delivery.

Results and Discussion. Volunteers have been prepared to become involved in the administrative structures, as Trustees, members of Advisory and Quality Assurance and Educational Oversight groups. More than 100 people have offered to be involved as course developers or as facilitators for course delivery, and to date 46 of these, from 13 countries, have been actively involved. Volunteer experts in Information and Communications Technology have extended open source course delivery mechanisms. Following an encouraging pilot course module, 117 students from 23 countries have enrolled in the first set of 6 course modules. Although the business model is not fully developed, this approach allows current module delivery at \$US50 each, to be more affordable to the target audience than traditional university based education.

Conclusions. A social model of capacity building in Public Health has been started and has been able to attract volunteers and students from a wide range of countries. The costs are likely to be low enough to allow this method to make a substantial contribution to capacity building in low-income settings.

Background

There are a number of societal trends which are transforming the way people help others, including the development of a 'third sector' of the economy where people are prepared to donate their time and money for the benefit of others¹□, and a 'social' model of philanthropy where businesses invest in the hope of a social return on their investment²□. This latter model had its origins in resource-poor settings, where micro loans through the Grameen Bank have transformed the lives of the poorest of people³□ – and this has been replicated elsewhere. These trends have not, til now, been applied to the important area of formal capacity building in resource-poor settings. Capacity building can either be performed at a government level to improve the competence of the population as a whole, by the individual who wishes to benefit and work out ways to self-learn, or by institutions who want to improve the capacity of their own employees or of those who will pay them to provide an educational program of some sort. A variant of the self-learn model can be found as part of the third sector, as in the University of the Third Age, where retired people come together to teach each other on a voluntary basis. With the exception of this last example, there is usually a high fee involved. In many countries, universities are becoming reliant on fees from overseas students - in Australia fees from overseas students represent the third largest 'export' earner for the country as a whole⁴□. Educational programs aimed at resource-poor settings funded by donors, often leave the side benefit of funding for the country providing the education, which may well be used to provide capacity development there as well. These vested interests have come to dominate international capacity building.

This has led the business model to dominate in the education for capacity building sector. Many well meaning teachers are subverted to meet the goals of their institutions or governments. These teachers are committed to meting capacity building goals in resource-poor settings, but their employers insist that they meet institutional goals rather than the goals of the recipient country. The voluntary sector is pretty much excluded from this activity. This 'social' model provides an alternative, and this is now aided by the development of new methods of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) which not only allow educational resource production and

delivery to occur outside the institutional setting, but also a new way for 'students' to collaborate in the learning process with their 'teachers'⁵. The 'open source' movement is key to this, where software and educational resource developers give their time to producing and adapting materials which then become freely available on the Internet⁶.

The Peoples Open Access Educational Initiative – the Peoples-uni – is one of the first examples of this 'social' model of international capacity building⁷. Volunteers develop an educational context to resources which are freely available on the Internet, and then deliver this, again using open source ICT. We report our early experience in attracting volunteers to work on this initiative, and the ability to attract students to the courses. The purpose of this paper is to report on the methods used to develop and deliver this type of capacity building programme, and the ability to attract volunteers and students.

Methods.

The creation of the Peoples-uni was not based on a scientific approach to the development of a social model of education, as this was a new approach with no previously identified or published methodology. It involved the creation of an administrative infrastructure, calls for and identification of volunteers, development of both the ICT infrastructure and course content, and identification of students and course delivery to them. A pilot course module was a key step, and has been reported⁸.

Results.

Administrative infrastructure. A group of colleagues, known to the author and instigator (RFH), came together to help plan the initiative. Following the creation of a charitable Trust in the UK, some of these became Trustees, and others became members of an International Advisory or a Quality Assurance and Educational Oversight group, which were each expanded by further members. All of these are volunteers, and other volunteers have subsequently joined to assist with the administrative aspects of running an organisation which wishes to provide a high quality and consistent educational programme. Credibility was gained through the support of the UK Royal Society for Public Health who have become an institutional partner and supporter. A small amount of funding has been provided by the UK Department of Health.

Course development. *Choice of courses.* Based on many years experience with the International Clinical Epidemiology Network (INCLIN)⁹, and the experience of having developed a fully online masters course in population health at the University of Manchester¹⁰, we did understand a continuing need for capacity building at the 'train the trainers' level. A decision to work initially at this level came through informal discussions with various people in resource-poor settings and a number of specially commissioned situation analyses in countries including Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, India and Nigeria. A decision was made to use a competence based educational model, and to develop modules which covered the 'foundation sciences' of Public Health as well as those which tackled a variety of 'Public Health problems'. The choice of individual modules was a mixture of availability of potential developers and feedback from students from 8 countries enrolled on a pilot course module on Maternal Mortality. The choice of competences has been described previously, but was based on discussion amongst the module developers using a specially developed template, and a framework derived from a search for other competences identified in other educational activities aimed at Public Health practitioners. Open source materials were readily available to illustrate the chosen competences, although most of these were not originally designed by academics or for formal educational purposes. Access to a number of resources was restricted by copyright restrictions, particularly from journal publishers.

Selection of developers. Following publication of various papers and presentations at meetings as well as personal appeals to colleagues and networks, more than 100 people volunteered to help with course development. They have come from across the globe, in resource-rich and -poor countries. A

development template was devised, based on the course module which we had pilot tested, and this was placed on a special web site using the Moodle open source platform. The choice of the same development and delivery platform was designed to familiarise the developers with the platform so they would be ready to act as online facilitators for course delivery. (An alternative of the use of Wiki Educator was explored in the development of the pilot module.) A majority of those who volunteered, did not in the end make a contribution to the development process. We have not formally investigated the reasons for this, but lack of familiarity with the ICT system which was perceived to be complex, and lack of clarity in the instructions for its use may have contributed. To date, 46 people have actively contributed to course module development. Public Health trainees from the UK Faculty of Public Health have provided major input to the development and delivery process, although other active members of the groups are based in 12 other countries. As we will discuss below, development is a continuing process, and those involved in the delivery, as tutors and students, are also invited to suggest modifications and additions. A group of ICT students at a UK university have been commissioned to help us develop a more clear explanation for, and maybe methods of, co-authoring of course modules.

ICT development. The use of e-learning through the Internet is the basis of the ability of Peoples-uni to assemble an international faculty and deliver courses to people in multiple countries. It also capitalises on the developments in ICT described above. Some of those involved in the Charity for African Welfare Development and Doctors Worldwide were original supporters of the ICT for Peoples-uni, and they have been joined by others. A server provided by Dasphir, based in Nigeria, hosts the course, and the group have developed new web site which includes an application system for student applications (with automated enrolments) and student tracking, each linked to Moodle. A system to create, and then for students to access, academic transcripts has also been developed.

Course delivery. One course module on Maternal Mortality was piloted at the end of 2007, and 6 course modules were offered between October 2008 and February 2009. Each module includes 5 Topics designed to last two weeks each, with additional time for catchup and assignments. 29 tutors agreed to act as online facilitators, and 25 have been active. Each course module has one general facilitator to oversee the process, and each Topic has one facilitator who thus may have a role with very limited time commitment. Facilitators are given guides and reminders by the Peoples-uni coordinator, but those who have agreed to play an active and identified role have done so. A number of other people have offered to act as online facilitators, and are being asked to join in a future 'semester'.

Student numbers. The pilot experience and its feedback is described and is available on the <http://peoples-uni.org>. Despite very little publicity or advertising for this initial intake, 117 students enrolled on 170 course modules in October 2008, and a limit of 30 students per module meant that all except one had to close before the end of the enrolment period. Students have come from 23 different countries, mainly in Africa, with the largest numbers from Nigeria, Tanzania and Uganda. A fee of \$US 50 will be charged for the academic transcript, although a similar amount will be charged in future before the start of the course (using an automated payment system). The pilot revealed that a number of students wanted the knowledge and skills rather than a qualification, and it remains to be seen how many will complete the assignments as required to receive the academic transcripts.

Discussion.

The experience with a social model of capacity building in Public Health for those in resource-poor settings has shown that open source materials and educational technology to deliver them are readily available, and that volunteers can be mobilised for course development, ICT support, course delivery and administrative infrastructure. An international faculty has been assembled, which includes those in low resource settings themselves. Health professionals seem keen to enrol as

students, but we wait to evaluate the course outcomes. We are in the early stages of the life of the Peoples-uni, and our current capacity to deliver and administer courses is already able to cope with a large uptake of student enrolments. As we improve and adapt the courses, including through the input of students, we are working towards the ability to scale up to accommodate large numbers of students. This will depend on our ability to maintain a large volunteer workforce. While the business model is not fully developed, and the need for some kind of funded infrastructure not clearly identified or articulated, we do believe that the use of the social model of capacity building may allow courses to be offered at a low enough cost to benefit a large number of health professionals who are otherwise not able to access this type of education, and contribute to the Public Health needs of resource-poor settings. We are also keen to collaborate with educational and other institutions in these settings, and hope that through the use of double badging of academic awards, or other forms of collaboration yet to be developed, our educational innovations and international faculty can contribute to the development of these institutions. We encourage anyone who wishes to collaborate in any way to make contact either to the author or through the we site <http://peoples-uni.org>.

Conclusions. A social model of capacity building in Public Health has been started and has been able to attract volunteers and students from a wide range of countries. The costs are likely to be low enough to allow this method to make a substantial contribution to capacity building in low-income settings. A number of challenges remain, including the ability to maintain a large volunteer workforce and to build partnerships and collaborations with other organisations.

The author declares that he has no competing interests

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