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Distance learning to support sustainable tourism

Appropriately designed collaborative distance learning can be an effective tool to support the concepts of sustainable tourism by permitting the distribution of customized learning materials to the various constituent groups involved in designing, developing and operating sustainable tourism projects. This research examines some of the aspects of this process.

Keywords: Distance learning, sustainable tourism, quality, modular approach

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Concept of distance learning

Distance learning tools permit the separation of teachers and learners in both time and space. The historic pedagogical approach gathers students together a teacher who is the primary driver of content and approach to a linear learning process (Beaudoin, 1990). Distance learning, facilitated by computer and telecommunications technology permits a shifting of the process from being teacher-driven to learner centered (McNeil & Chernish et al., 2002; Herrmans & Reid, 2002; Chernish & Schott et al., 2003). Various forms of distance learning have been in use for more than a century, but newly available electronic technology encourages the development of effective asynchronous learning approaches with learning enabled in new nonlinear ways (Spivack & Chernish, 1999; Chernish, 2003).

Advantages and benefits of distance learning

Distance learning has many advantages in developing and supporting sustainable tourism activities. The very nature of sustainable tourism operations and tourism education means that potential learners may be geographically dispersed, found in small groups, have different demographic characteristics, have different language and learning needs, and may benefit from learning efforts at different times. Distance learning can be adapted to meet those needs (Chernish, 1994; Herrmans & Reid, 2002).

Collaborative approach

A collaborative approach to distance learning combines participation of several types of people and resources to create effective learning opportunities (George Washington University, 1994; McNeil & Chernish et al., 2002). Technologists, producers, subject matter experts, and representatives of user communities can collaborate to identify unmet needs, establish program and learning goals on both macro and micro levels, and then produce modules to satisfy those identified learning objectives.

Distance collaboration has been shown to produce more effective programs than is typical with individuals working alone. The collaboration draws upon expertise in managing the project and producing materials, encourages the participation of persons with technical and computer skills that are not generally possessed by instructors, and encourages the use of a wide range of people with subject matter expertise (Boger & Brewer, 1997).

Modular construction

Typically, academic programs, whether offered for-credit in a formal higher-education setting or offered on a not-for-credit basis, have been conceived as a relatively inflexible package. This package might consist of a *course,* a *program*, a *degree*, or a similar construct. Any of these might be likened to a citrus fruit: several major segments bound together with a cover and offered as a whole (Schott & Chernish et al., 2003).

Another approach to the conceptualization, design, and delivery of learning consists of a larger number of smaller parts that might be compared to a pomegranate. That approach requires the development of smaller freestanding modules, like pomegranate segments that each have a kernel, some flesh, and a skin to give it shape. This modular approach permits the interaction of

different modules, and facilitates the sharing of modules among programs. The approach becomes non-linear and learner driven with new flexibility. The design and use of computer-driven technology also provides great latitude for inclusion of various pedagogical tools to effectively meet learner needs. A typical learning module might contain textual materials, audio tracks, video clips, synchronous discussions, threaded asynchronous discussions, hyperlinks, work assignments, progress checks, examinations, and the use of applications directly related to the learners' needs and area of interest (Chernish, 2003).

Collaboratively-developed modules are managed through use of database management programs. Such a computer application provides for ease of updating and change, use of different language applications as well as the inclusion of accommodations for persons with disabilities or special needs. The learning modules can be distributed on CD-ROMS, by using the Internet, or in other ways.

Quality processes

A recurring issue in academic as well as in travel and tourism sectors relates to the quality of the teaching, learning materials, and program effectiveness. Traditional assessment has been based on final learning outcomes (tests and examinations) with only passing regard to the intervening factors affecting quality. This new approach encourages the application of a systematic process for quality assurance which is comparable to the ISO 9000:2000 standards widely accepted in industry; IOSO-9000 examines quality considerations at each step of the design, development and delivery of the learning systems (von Zharen & Chernish, 2002; Chernish & Schott, 2003).

Focus on sustainable tourism education

This modular, or pomegranate approach promises significant benefits to the advancement of sustainable tourism concepts and education. The approach encourages the identification of both broad and specific areas in which behavioral change of target populations is desired. The learning may be targeted to tourists, host communities, employers and employees at destinations, and to students in traditional educational programs.

The nature of the sustainable tourism concept implies that there are widely dispersed locations and the possibility of smaller learner populations than might be the case with larger and mass-tourism developments. Education and training efforts to reach those interested in planning, developing, and operating in a sustainable element can be more easily and efficiently reached by using learning materials and programs distributed by using CD-ROMs or the internet. Properly designed learning efforts need not be dependent upon high-bandwidth telecommunications, but can be effectively enhanced through use of low-speed connections.

Distance learning can also be a tool for delivering educational modules quickly, with tailoring meet specific language, culture, or destination needs. They can be used as support for the Rio Declaration, or on the Charter for Sustainable Tourism that came from the Lanzarote Conference (NAU, 2002). The Sustainability Triad of Economic Values, Social-Cultural Values, and Environmental Values (Herrmans & Reid, 2002) can be explained and expanded in a wide range of modules for various learner groups.

The collaborative approach to developing modular learning permits the interaction of local experts, subject matter experts with broader expertise, and specialist in instructional design, web development, distance learning and others to create tailored programs to meet the needs of various constituent groups, whether employee of local operators, developers and investors, or within traditional educational settings.

It is important to note that distance learning is not offered as a panacea, but rather as a tool. Modules may be combined with other learning methods to produce a "blended" approach to best meet needs of various learner groups. For example, modules could be used as part of a traditional classroom, may be used for as-needed employee training, or as the basis for discussion or other educational needs. It makes possible a rich variety of approaches to delivery of subject matters to reinforce sustainable tourism support needs.

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