

International Problem Solving through Distance Learning

Introduction

In 2005, the USAID-funded Education Quality Improvement Program 2 (EQUIP2) partnered with the World Bank Institute (WBI) and the British Council (BC) to design and deliver a distance learning course (DLC) titled Accountability, Governance, and Quality of Education Decentralization in Africa. Participants represented the government, civil society, academia, and NGOs at all levels from ten African countries. The course incorporated innovative technology and blended several adult learning methods to create an ideal learning environment across organizations and countries.

For ministry of education (MOE) officials, course developers, and donors interested in low-cost capacity building courses, this DLC demonstrates how to lead a diverse group of education sector actors in a series of problem solving activities. The course aimed to address the issues and challenges faced by these participants and create space for dialogue and problem solving.

This paper describes not only the learning process through which individuals and groups reflected on their professional, institutional, and education sector priorities, but also how the DLC used video conferencing and other media as interactive tools. The course avoided one-way transmission of knowledge from expert to trainee and moved beyond isolated training events, power points, and “talking heads,” evolving into a reflection–learning–action–change process. The summary of the course’s outcomes demonstrates how it stimulated further action at three levels: individual participants, their institutions and organizations, and their country’s education system. These outcomes illustrate how the participants began to see themselves as resources and agents of education reform, how participants applied the knowledge gained through the course, and how participants developed ways to improve their countries’ education systems.

Background

The WBI, BC, and EQUIP2 partnership focused on decentralization as a key education reform issue. Although embraced by many African countries, decentralization has not led to significant improvements in education quality and learning outcomes. In spite of the common challenges, African educators are not sharing lessons learned with their counterparts. Furthermore, decentralization research has not provided specific implementation strategies that improve education quality. Indeed, decentralization has had mixed results. Through their work, the



coordinating partners knew that policymakers' and practitioners' were gaining insight and experience from decentralization efforts in Africa. The problem was that the information was unshared.

The WBI, BC, and EQUIP2 partnership addressed this communication problem through an interactive DLC. This course enabled participants from all levels and sectors of the education system and across several African countries to better access and share knowledge, information, and experiences in education decentralization. The DLC engaged participants in collaborative problem solving around decentralization's relationship to education quality, while participants shared their experiences navigating political relationships and discussed how decentralization helps and hinders progress towards achievement targets. The course allowed participants to confront obstacles to change and helped them to deal with these real-life challenges. Every effort was made to build relationships among participants and to explore the roles of not only the individuals, but also the institutions and the sector as a whole. To maximize interaction between countries while keeping costs low, the course used videoconferencing and CDs to provide participants with varied learning opportunities.

To date the DLC has been held twice (September to December 2006 and August to December 2007) for over 200 participants from national and local governments, schools, civil society, NGOs, and the donor community from Cameroon, Ethiopia, the Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Uganda, and Zambia.

A Model for Collaborative Adult Learning Within and Across Countries

For over four decades, training has taken on two distinct forms: expert-centered courses and learner-centered courses. Traditional courses bring in content experts to “transmit” knowledge to the participants through classroom presentations, case studies, and lectures. While content-rich, participants may leave the course unable to apply the knowledge. In traditional courses, learning is predominantly an individual experience.

In contrast, learner-centered courses draw upon adult learning principles by building on the learners' needs, priorities, and experiences. Outside experts are replaced by the group's own expertise: knowledge is participant generated. Participants begin to trust in their own capacity to solve problems and do not feel dependent on imported solutions and outside experts. Solutions are likely to be more appropriate because they are based on local resources, values, and realities. However, these solutions are often not enriched by other perspectives beyond those of the participants.

In both approaches, participants return to the same work context without the systems, policies, and institutional willingness to support change. The new ideas that participants bring back are not always well received. The change required in education systems to reach national goals requires the support of a critical mass of individuals, organizations, and institutions. Furthermore, the obstacle to change is not always a lack of knowledge, but rather deeper systemic issues. Pre-packaged training or awareness building courses may be interesting, but do not necessarily lead to learning, application, and results.

The DLC described here blended and went beyond these two training approaches. On one hand, the course used external experts and drew upon international experiences to enrich the learning environment. Equally important, the course content and learning process were participant-based to ensure that the individuals grew confident as agents of change. To connect the diverse group of participants, the course used group discussions, intersession activities (country team activities between videoconferences), videoconferencing, and a capstone event.

The DLC: A Cycle of Reflection–Learning–Action–Change

For participants to become change agents in these complex systems, training needs to offer more than new skills, knowledge, and attitudes. Effective capacity building requires engaging participants through reflection and opportunities to apply their new skills, knowledge, and attitudes in their own environments. The DLC achieved this by:

- Basing content on locally created solutions;
- Providing outside experience in education decentralization and school quality while building on the participants' experiences;
- Blending training methods to stimulate reflection and discussion;
- Allowing participants to design and lead the learning experience; and
- Developing a network and community of practice among the participants.

DLC Method

The DLC used a range of technology and training methods to create a cycle of reflection–learning–action–change. The five-month course exposed country teams to current international research, and offered the opportunity for participants to apply that knowledge, share experiences with counterparts, and conduct their own research and analysis. The cycle of learning followed the following procedure:

1. Each month a new course module and readings were sent on CD to the individual participants through country facilitators. After receiving the course CD, country team discussions took place, organized by the country facilitator,



- to prepare for the videoconference. The country facilitator also organized discussions, action research, mapping of research/studies, analysis of the status of decentralization, and other themes participants identified as relevant to their work. This month-long period between modules was called the intersession.
2. A monthly videoconference moderated from the WBI Global Development Learning Center in Washington, D.C. brought together the participating countries' teams. The videoconferences allowed each country to share and discuss their experiences related to the module.
 3. At the end of the five-month pilot course a capstone event was held to give the participants from all five countries the opportunity to meet and share approaches, tools, and country case studies identified during the course. The capstone event for the second course did not take place due to scheduling and funding issues, but is planned for future courses.

DLC Content

The coordinating partners developed five modules based on an initial assessment of the participating countries' needs. Flexibility was built in to allow the course to evolve into an interactive process of reflection and learning, and to be participant-led. To create an interactive, participant-led course the modules not only presented background information, but also provided exercises that required the participants to critique the information presented, reflect on their own experiences, and ask questions of their own. This process was designed to lead to further learning and discussion. While each module retained an overall theme, the detail and discussions changed in response to participant needs. The modules were distributed to participants on CDs and contained lectures, video clips, interviews, research, case studies, and web-links.

Module One: An Introduction to Decentralization. This module provided the rationale for the course, defined decentralization, highlighted international experiences, and presented the decentralization framework. Participants examined why countries choose to decentralize their education systems and whether decentralization leads, directly or indirectly, to improvements at the school level. The participants, individually and as country teams, looked at the points of decision-making power in their education systems and then shared their analyses and experiences during the videoconference.

Module Two: Effective Schools and School Quality. Divided into four parts, Module Two explored the connections between effective schools and the policies and practices of decentralization. In Part 1, participants examined and discussed sub-national data, identifying chronically underserved regions within their countries. During Part 2, participants reviewed the literature on effective schools and discussed the characteristics of effective schools in their countries. For Part 3, participants drew

on case studies of cost-effective community-based schools in developing countries. Participants examined the characteristics of these community-based schools and discussed the implications for a country's decentralization policies and practices. Based on the reflection and learning from the previous Parts, in Part 4 participants examined and critiqued their own country's decentralization policies and practices.

Module Three: Decentralization and Teacher Development, Deployment, and Retention.

This three part module reviewed two aspects of decentralized teacher management: teacher education and teacher recruitment/deployment. Using African case studies, participants reviewed the potential gains and losses of applying decentralized approaches to teacher management. Part 1 provided a conceptual framework for quality while participants looked at the relationship between teachers and student learning by reviewing the latest research and comparing these findings with their own experiences. Specific attention was paid to three elements: attendance of teachers, attitudes of teachers, and attitudes toward teachers. In Part 2, participants looked at decentralization's role in improving the quality and relevance of teacher education and in meeting the increased demand for teachers. Participants also assessed the trade-offs associated with decentralized teacher training models. Part 3 focused on the use of decentralized teacher recruitment to increase teacher deployment to rural schools and to improve teacher attendance and equity, particularly in regard to the participants' own countries.

Module Four: Accountability and Governance in Decentralized Systems.

In Module Four, participants examined the reasons for weak accountability in public education systems and discussed how to strengthen it. Participants paid particular attention to the role of voice and governance, the involvement of parents in school management, and the importance of information on school finance and performance. Part 1 presented a framework for assessing the strength of accountability in public education and identified the factors affecting accountability. Part 2 led participants in a detailed exploration of the factors influencing accountability. In Part 3, participants discussed the clarity with which roles are assigned across levels of government in their own countries.

Module Five: Restructuring Ministries of Education for Effective Systems Reform.

In the final module, participants looked at how the roles of a traditional ministry of education must change to provide for the delivery of quality education. In Part 1, participants examined the importance of ministry of education capacity development to create effective, decentralized schools. Part 2 allowed participants to discuss decentralization's effects on the MOE's structure and functions at the national level. In Part 3, country teams identified their systems' strategic goals linked to decentralization and determined what their MOE needed to attain those goals.



For Part 4, country teams created capacity development plans for their MOEs to determine who should provide capacity development and how best to create change.

To ensure that the content engaged individuals and groups of participants both within and across countries, the coordinating partners blended training methods to stimulate discussion, reflection, and interaction among individuals and country teams.

Key Elements to a Successful DLC

The following ten elements have been identified as being critical to the success of the DLC.

1. **Selecting the right combination of countries.** It is important to choose countries that can learn from each other and provide a rich set of experiences related to the course. In this case, the coordinating partners were also familiar with all participating countries through their work. Based on the first two courses, the ideal number of participating countries is four or five—a higher number limits the participation of each country and a lower number limits the richness of experiences shared. The interactive nature of the course required fluid and substantive discussions. As such, using a common language was crucial. In the first course, five countries participated: Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, and Zambia. In the second course, seven countries participated: Cameroon, The Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Malawi, Senegal, and Zambia. In each case, English was the language used.
2. **Finding the right country facilitators.** Country facilitators were crucial to the success of the course and were recruited over a two-month period through the coordinating partners' in-country networks. Requisites for an effective facilitator included: credibility in the education sector, knowledge of the actors and issues, and the ability facilitate a participatory process of individual and group learning. The facilitator bridged the individual, organizational, and country needs with the coordinating partners. The facilitator also created the conditions for participants to pursue their own learning agenda based on organizational and national priorities. The facilitator needed to take ownership of the course and build an interest within the education community, the MOE, and donors. Finally, the facilitator was responsible for finding funding for the country's participation in the capstone event.
3. **Orienting facilitators.** Because the facilitator's role was so important to the learning process, an orientation was essential. Two practice videoconferences were held with the facilitators to discuss roles, course management and philosophy, methodology and pedagogy, the course schedule, participant recruitment and team composition, communications, and reporting. The orientation ensured

that facilitators were familiar not only with the course content, but also with the videoconference and CD formats.

4. **Finding the right participants.** Improved effectiveness in the pursuit of educational goals was an explicit objective of the course, and allowing the participants to look at the education system as a whole was a central part of the methodology. Therefore, participants had to be recruited from a wide spectrum of institutions, organizations, positions, and experiences. Participants benefited from and contributed to collective learning and were needed to be in position to make changes at various parts of the education sector. Facilitators were asked to recruit participants with different perspectives as well. As a result, each team contained a variety of stakeholders (Ministry of Education officials, district education officials, head teachers, NGO staff, and members of civil society). No formal compensation was given to participants for travel or participation; motivation for attending, therefore, was based on genuine interest.
5. **Analyzing participants' needs.** It was important from the start that participants co-construct a learning process that would promote change at the individual, institutional, and sector levels. In designing the second course, each participant identified his/her priority issues and expected results from their perspective as individuals, their organization, and the education sector. This information helped create a course that was responsive to the participants and set criteria on which to evaluate the course.
6. **Preparing relevant course content.** Before and during the first months of the course, CD modules were produced to address the course themes and to create a framework for discussing education quality. Experts in these themes created the five modules while past and current participants and facilitators were involved in the course design. The modules contained lectures, video clips, interviews, research, case studies, and web-links. Each participant was given a copy of the CD to review prior to the team discussion of each module. The CD allowed for a cost-effective dissemination of course materials. In addition to the CD, each facilitator received a Facilitators' Guide containing activities, discussion questions, and facilitation tips for each module. Using this guide, the facilitator and participants could customize the intersession based on their priorities.
7. **Building in time for discussion and content review.** To ensure participant ownership of the course, participants reviewed the content prior to a broader discussion with their country team. The facilitator guided the team's answers to focus questions posed in each module in preparation for the videoconference and countries were encouraged to pose questions to the other countries.
8. **Providing an opportunity to share experiences and learn from other countries.** The coordinating partners used a series of low-cost videoconferences to support the exchange of information, experiences, and advice between the participating countries. To help structure the time in the videoconference, the coordinating team in Washington drafted focus questions and circulated an



agenda to the facilitators for their input and suggestions. A concerted effort was made to minimize the amount of air time given to the Washington coordinators to maximize the contributions and discussion across the country teams. Each country received equal air time and participants were encouraged to present their experiences and invite comments from other countries. Unanswered questions were put in the “parking lot” to be answered by country teams via e-mail during the next intersession.

9. **Allocating time for group reflection and planning.** Intersession activities between videoconferences responded to individual and country priorities and questions. Each country team created their own intersession agenda and activities based on individual and group interests. The organizers provided illustrative ideas but the choice of intersession activities was a decision made by the individual participants, groups, and country teams. Each team formed smaller teams to research or discuss specific topics. Intersession activities were key to the DLC’s success since they enabled each country to more closely examine the issues raised during the videoconferences. Intersession activities allowed participants to meet in an informal setting where positions and job titles were less important. The intersession activities also created a space for country teams to plan for the advocacy of new ideas and the implementation of approaches gained from the course.
10. **Ending on a high note and maintaining the on-going group discussion.** The final videoconference allowed countries to share how the course had impacted their work. Additionally, it gave the country teams an opportunity to express their appreciation to each other for sharing both their positive and negative experiences. Participants also had the opportunity to evaluate the course and share how the course contributed to their individual professional development and built capacity at the institutional and sector level.

Course Outcomes

To date the DLC has been held twice for over 200 participants from national and local governments, schools, civil society, NGOs, and the donor community from Cameroon, Ethiopia, the Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Uganda, and Zambia.

To assess the course, the coordinating partners looked at whether the course’s design and implementation enabled participants to:

- Better access and share knowledge, information, and experience around decentralization and school quality;
- Confront and address obstacles to change;
- Build relationships with other participants;
- Explore the roles of individuals, institutions, and the sector as a whole; and

- Improve education policies and actions, resulting in more and better schools for greater numbers of children.

The course evaluation took place during and after the final videoconference and during the pilot course’s capstone event. Participants completed questionnaires and shared how the course benefited them personally and to what degree the course built capacity within their organizations and sectors.

Judging from their responses, the course clearly provided country teams the opportunity to develop critical knowledge and understanding around decentralization and school quality, an important area of education reform. Participants agreed that cross-country sharing of experiences was an effective way to gain insights about how certain decentralization policies and approaches affect education quality. Moreover, the course was instrumental in developing participant in-country and international relationships. Participants were also able to describe the capacity building process within and across their institutions and sectors as a result of the course. Specifically, each country team developed an advocacy strategy and implementation plan for a reform or change in response to a problem they had identified. The outcomes mentioned here are elaborated below.

Individual participants developed knowledge and understanding around decentralization and school quality and used this knowledge to develop strategies and influence others. The following examples demonstrate not only increased individual capacity, but also the course’s value to people in positions of power who did not participate. This extrinsic motivation is critical to ensure that participants value the course and continue to draw on what they learned and shared in their work.

- In Cameroon, participants obtained funding for a decentralization research project and used knowledge gained from the course in an international conference.
- In Ethiopia, participants helped re-write the decentralization check-list and used instruments from the course to problem solve within their region.
- Participants from Ghana were promoted to positions of higher authority (Director General of Ghana Education Services and Spokesperson for the National Education Reform Board) and influenced education policies and practice through the Education Decentralization Committee.

Individual participants strengthened relationships within their institutions and contributed to capacity building activities across institutions. Participants found the issues and knowledge important enough to share with their colleagues through intersession activities and discussion groups formed after the course.



- In Cameroon, participants shared the course content with private school administrators and primary and secondary school.
- In Ethiopia, participants used the course content to training their colleagues. The MOE plans to offer the course to officials from the provincial and district levels.
- In Ghana, participants held a country-wide discussion on education quality, convened a forum for 450 Accra education staff, and contributed to radio discussions and newspapers on education topics. In a three-day workshop, approximately 100 personnel from district education offices, district assemblies, civic unions, and school management committees discussed issues from the course, namely how governance, accountability, teacher training and deployment, and school management committees impact education quality.
- Participants from the Kenyan Education Services Institute applied knowledge gained from the course in its work with districts and developed modules for Kenya’s decentralization process. The Ministry of Education (MOE) then asked that the participants deliver a similar course for other MOE staff.

The course has supported more effective policy dialogue in the participating countries. Through its participatory, reflective process, the course encouraged an informed dialogue and helped education stakeholders to form alliances.

- In Cameroon, participants have new positions and responsibilities and are influencing change within the education sector. Additionally, course participants have been interviewed on the radio to publicize education decentralization.
- In The Gambia, the course has solidified the education sector’s concept of decentralization. Lessons learned from the course were used to inform the preparation of the sector’s Medium-Term Plan, 2008–2011 to continue the strides towards deconcentration and decentralization.
- In Kenya, participants prepared a report on the course for education stakeholders and developed radio programs to inform the public about education decentralization.
- In Uganda, a MOE advisory committee was formed to provide insight into decentralization reform. The course linked the research and policy communities, and this diverse group presented best practices and lessons learned for decentralization at a symposium for the Funding Agencies Group, MOE, and other ministries. This process created a collaborative relationship between head teachers, local authorities, and central MOE officials.
- Zambian participants held a roundtable discussion on national television and took part in writing the country’s new education bill.

The positive outcomes from the pilot course encouraged additional countries to join the second course. The Gambian Department of Education requested that the country be included in the second course and offered funding and support to 12

participants who flew to Senegal every month to participate. The Zambian MOE provided support for the participation of provincial and central MOE senior officials. The Zambian MOE also asked EQUIP2 and WBI to custom-design an additional course to the MOE's capacity building needs in its national strategy.

Conclusion

The objective of the DLC was ambitious: to enable participants to improve education policies and actions that in turn result in more and better schools for greater numbers of children. Grounded in the literature and experience on best practices in adult learning, the coordinating partners developed a low-cost course that provided:

- An innovative, stimulating, and relevant course to decision-makers and practitioners that included the latest research and experience in education decentralization;
- A learning environment that led to new and improved informed relationships;
- A platform that connected a diverse set of participants, organizations, and institutions using distance learning technology;
- A rich dialectic between different points of view: inside–outside, local–national, national–international, and theory–practice. Learning was not confined by the coordinating partners, nor was it limited to one country's experience.

By effectively using videoconferencing technology, rich and relevant content, and an appropriate blend of adult-learning methodologies, participants took part in a reflection–learning–action–change process that enabled them to move towards improving education policies and actions.

This DLC focused on decentralization and education quality, but it is important to note that this approach could be effective tackling other areas of concern for education sector reform (e.g., teacher professional development, assessment, information and data collection and use, and curriculum development). For donors interested in funding effective and low-cost courses, the DLC demonstrates the possibility of doing so while bringing together a diverse group of countries and participants in a series of problem solving activities dealing with the participants' real-life challenges.



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