The place of monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment within eLearning programmes

A follow-up report from the eAlumni Workshop, Zschortau

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David Hollow
PhD candidate, Royal Holloway, University of London
d.m.hollow@rhul.ac.uk
Introduction

Context
My participation in the eAlumni workshop was at the invitation of Dr Til Schoenherr. I attended in order to collect data for my doctoral research, to contribute to the workshop and to provide a written summary of my findings for interested participants. The PhD research I am undertaking concerns the use of ICT within African education and specifically how educational initiatives which utilise ICT can be most effectively monitored and evaluated. Joining this global gathering was therefore an ideal opportunity to hear and learn from a wide variety of eLearning experts. The following brief report outlines the findings of my research during the workshop, focussing specifically on the challenges surrounding monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of eLearning centres and the associated training courses.

Methodology
Throughout the workshop I conducted individual interviews and a focus group, held informal discussions, collated documents and reports, participated in the workshop activities and kept a research diary of my observations. I choose to adopt a relatively unstructured approach to interviews so as to give each individual opportunity to discuss with me what they considered to be the most significant aspects of my questions.

Structure
During the week together I heard fascinating accounts of the many challenges being faced in the eLearning programmes and the innovative and varied ways in which they are being overcome. This short report will not encompass all of these aspects and will address only those issues related to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and impact assessment. The body of the report begins with an overview of general observations made, before focussing on the reasons for frequent marginalising of the topics. Following this, the report highlights the role of incorporating unintended impacts when considering the M&E and impact assessment of eLearning. It then considers the case of NOLNET and examines the evaluation conducted in order to provide guidance for other projects considering similar activities. In closing, it focuses on four pertinent issues when considering potential routes forward. The majority of data for the analysis comes from interviews conducted with workshop participants. In light of this, the arguments throughout the report are illustrated with direct quotations which are left unnamed so as to maintain the anonymity of respondents.

General observations
The projects represented at the workshop demonstrated a wide variety of approaches in regarding to M&E and impact assessment. This was in regard to actual experience within the projects, perceived limitations, constraints and ideals of best practice. Causal factors were noted to be the variety in project lifespan, different scales of project operation, the global representation and variety of cultural backgrounds. One project had undertaken a comprehensive evaluation of their activities whilst others adopted a more ‘process based’ approach, monitoring activities continuously, gaining student feedback and conducting tests to check understanding. However, despite some projects running for up to five years there were no examples of thorough impact assessment based on education or capacity building objectives. All respondents
agreed that the measuring of quality within the course design was very difficult and that M&E and impact assessment were often marginalised for a number of reasons.

**Marginalising of M&E and impact assessment**

There was widespread recognition from participants regarding the value of M&E and impact assessment. However, this was frequently accompanied by an acknowledgement that factors such as **enthusiasm for the projects, lack of skills, lack of money, lack of time** and **technology focus** often caused it to be marginalised.

**Enthusiasm for projects**

It was noted that so many ICT related projects are being established in the developing world at the moment that there is not perceived to be time to stop and think about how to effectively incorporate M&E. It is a rapidly expanding field which is exciting to be involved with and so there is no pressure to engage with complex issues of defining outcome-based objectives within proposals. Such a level of scrutiny that might be needed in other spheres of development work is not yet required in ICT.

‘What we’re doing with eLearning is exciting, there are so many positives and enthusiasm that this overshadows the negatives, you don’t take time to figure out what we are missing, what we could have done differently. So we don’t think too much about meeting the objectives...’

**Lack of skills**

The newness of the field, with the associated enthusiasm, also means that there are often a lack of skilled people available. Respondents noted that even if they wanted to conduct an M&E exercise or impact assessment of their project it would be very difficult to do properly because people are not available.

‘We would like to evaluate more widely and see who is using our courses – but capacity is the issue – it is just me and a small team... There are a lack of people who can do it – no one is around who can evaluate ICT – there is a knowledge gap.’

**Lack of time**

Despite the enthusiasm surrounding eLearning, the majority of participants at the project level are still undertaking it in addition to their normal workload. This means that eLearning activities are often squashed into whatever spare time is available and so M&E is never the top priority.

‘It is always the same small handful of people trying to do a mountain of work - but everyone was aware of the fact it [M&E] needed to be done and it kept being pushed to the side.’

**Lack of money**

An area of ambiguity surrounding the marginalising of M&E was in regard to finances. As illustrated by the two contrasting quotations, some respondents saw money as the reason why it is marginalised whilst others saw securing money as the reason to focus on it. Despite this, all participants agreed that undertaking a full impact assessment constitutes a considerable challenge that is both prohibitively expensive and time-consuming.
‘In the institutions we have worked with, monitoring and evaluation only comes into the programme when someone from outside asks for it. When more money is needed for the project then someone asks for an evaluation, so the project sends some people out into the field to do it… just so that they can get money’

‘Monitoring and evaluation is often forgotten because it is not factored into project costs. It does not bring in money – it draws on the money that you have available for the project.’

**Technology focus**

A couple of participants noted the emphasis on technology as opposed to information and communication as a significant reason for marginalising M&E within ICT programmes.

‘Monitoring and evaluation is marginalised within ICT for education programmes due to a misconception. In Africa we concentrate on the technology and forget that the tool at the heart is the information and the communication. Also, computers are a syndrome, you start talking about ICT and people just ask “How many computers are you going to give us?”’

**Unintended impacts**

It was noted that the unintended impacts of eLearning projects must form a central part of any monitoring, evaluation or impact assessment-related exercise. Three examples that have been witnessed as by-products of the eLearning programmes are enhanced **cross-cultural collaboration**, **significant gender empowerment** and **organisational change**.

**Cross cultural collaboration**

In regard to cross cultural collaboration one participant noted that the nature of the workshop had been unlike anything that he had experienced before.

‘I have never seen a workshop like this where people from all the major world religions come together and there is not a single clash between the cultures and everyone works together, it is remarkable… Maybe it is because eLearning facilitates such an environment and makes it possible. eLearning does what no other development project in the world can do, it gathers people together from all cultures and backgrounds and forces them to work together to learn a new skill into which they all have equal ability to give input and shape.’

**Gender empowerment**

Of the eight eLearning networks (and another two affiliated) which have been established so far, only two are led by a male. The others are all led by females who have been elected to lead by their male colleagues. One participant reflected on the potential reasons behind the impact of eLearning on gender empowerment.

‘Maybe eLearning helps for gender empowerment because it is something in which you are forced to collaborate, you have to
communicate with each other a lot and ask for help and learn from one another. Maybe that comes more naturally to us [as women].'

Organisational change
The third unintended impact that was highlighted was in regard to the effect that introducing eLearning can have on catalysing organisational change. One proponent of this view suggested that it is due to the direction of the movement.

'We know that the organisational change which often comes about through eLearning is almost never requested from the top management – they are not aware of what they are asking for and the organisational change that will come with it. So people have got to overcome resistances – it is so difficult to get an eLearning policy in place – it is all a bottom-up movement.'

In discussion surrounding each of these three issues it was noted that, although interesting anecdotes, they could not yet be verified or proven to be causal effects of eLearning. In order to transition beyond the anecdote to the point where hypotheses could actually be tested there is a need for increased M&E and impact assessment to be conducted. Within the objectives of any study it would need to be stated that a desired output was to assess impact upon these three, previously unintended but wholly positive, consequences of eLearning. An added complexity is that although beneficial, they are not categories that are central to many development programmes, activities and objectives. This, in conjunction with the bottom-up as opposed to conventional top-down structure of eLearning initiatives, means that such impacts are often difficult to quantify. In light of this, there is a need for innovate methods which can assess impact in unconventional terms.

Case study of NOLNET
NOLNET has been active since 2005 and they recently conducted an evaluation of their programme. A brief review of the strengths, limitations and challenges encountered serves to assist other groups in undertaking similar effective evaluations in the future. NOLET was established as a national eLearning centre based on multi-stakeholder partnership and it was the first of its kind within an African context.

Strengths of the NOLNET evaluation:
- Multiple stakeholder engagement (beneficiaries, policy makers, implementers)
- A combination of internal and external involvement
- Clear objectives set
- Appropriate methods (interviews structured but informal and open-ended)
- Culturally appropriate (not overly-directive approach)
- Space provided for participant feedback making it an enjoyable process
- Honest regarding weaknesses and recognising areas for improvement
- Participatory approach in question formation and applicability
- Access to a wide variety of resources
- Effective within a limited budget
- Realistic targets within the circumstances

'We all went to the presentation of the results, the feedback
session. So we all had the opportunity to give our input there, to read through the report and add or change anything that you don’t agree with.’

Limitations of the NOLNET evaluation:

- Time constraints and participants very busy
- More work required than anticipated
- Not ideal timing (people leaving because it was the end of the year)
- Limited number of methods (lack of triangulation)
- Over-emphasis on programme inputs (number of participants etc)
- Limited consideration of impact on capacity building
- Limited opportunities for feedback (additional feedback workshop requested)
- Lack of financial resources

‘Because of a lack of human resources we had not gone to the level where we can go back and interview someone again and ask how, having completed the ELDI, you have implemented to the students, to measure the impact on that level.’

‘As I’m sure you will have noted from the report, we had our weaknesses as well – but that is the beauty of the report... it helps us now to improve on those areas that we had either turned a blind eye to or were simply not aware. But you can only get that through an evaluation once people have had the opportunity to express themselves.’

Findings

The report has considered the reasons behind the marginalising of M&E and impact assessment within the eLearning programmes, the need to incorporate the unintended impacts, and the lessons which can be drawn from the example of NOLNET. It now closes with four observations which offer suggestion for productive steps forward.

Challenge the notion that M&E has to wait

There is widespread feeling that M&E cannot be undertaken until a programme has been established for at least five years. This assumption should be challenged by re-conceptualising M&E as a valuable method for ensuring ongoing improvement of the programme, constituting part of the process of development as well as an occasional event. This could be made easier by sharing resources amongst the programme to make M&E and impact assessment more accessible, assisting one another and ensuring that it is not prohibitively expensive.

Adopt a culture of process-based monitoring into the programmes

In this way participants are motivated and set their own objectives, with the incentive to provide feedback and evaluate the process. This changes the culture from one of M&E as external imposition into M&E as a internally driven programme of improvement. A positive consequence of this shift in approach to M&E is the level of
skills added to those involved throughout the process, as noted in reference to one evaluation study;

‘It is amazing what those internal staff took out of involvement in the process – it was a significant capacity building event for them in itself.’

**Transition beyond anecdotal evidence**

Several participants expressed frustration that stakeholder awareness, especially amongst senior staff, surrounding the benefits of eLearning was not often present, with much scepticism regarding quality and effectiveness. Indeed, some of the scepticism is not unfounded, as noted by one respondent;

‘Having the ability to develop a course is not all of it – implementing is key... There are lots of beautifully designed courses out there that are just sitting there and not implemented.’

In such an environment the place of rigorous M&E and impact assessment is clearly required to provide substantive evidence of positive outcomes rather than enthusiastic anecdotes and thereby convince sceptics of the value of eLearning programmes.

**Focus on wider development agendas**

As with any evaluation of eLearning, the ultimate assessment of impact is in regard to the wider implications on development programmes and educational objectives;

‘We really need a study to prove that the programme leads to a change in teaching and learning style, over two, three or five years.’

This must be an intentional focus which is made explicit in programme objectives in order to be realised. As one participant noted;

‘The most important indicator is to find out whether they [course participants] will really jump out of this pond of eLearning and serve the subject section demands of their countries.’

In order for this to be achieved, it is important to consider the benefit of the initiative for the livelihoods of the whole community, not just training of course participants. Likewise, it is necessary to establishing a method for tracking people to establish usage patterns, sustained commitment, participant communication and long term impact following the completion of the course. The eLearning Development Portal provides a potentially useful indicator of this project usage.

**Conclusion**

The place of eLearning within broader development work is quickly evolving. As the sphere becomes more widespread and recognised the criteria for sustained funding will become increasingly dependent upon demonstrable results. It will therefore be vital to incorporate and prioritise M&E and impact assessment which focus on clear educational and capacity building outcomes.

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Resources

If you are interested in reading further about M&E and impact assessment within ICT for education and capacity building programmes then the following resources may be useful.


[www.mande.co.uk](http://www.mande.co.uk)

Website and associated mailing list (M&E News) established by Rick Davies. Reference point for further enquiry and portal for useful information (information on how to join the mailing list is also accessible on the website).