Studying by Extension in a Remote Area

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One of the factors which affect the outcome of formal learning is the conditions in which students learn (Ramsden and Entwistle 1981). For distance learners, these conditions are often difficult. Access to resources is restricted, as is the interaction between teacher and student and among students. This means that, in many cases, distance learners depend entirely on their course package. Yet several researchers have warned that exclusive reliance on packaged materials does not enable students to become critical thinkers (e.g., Garrison 1993; Ratuva 1996). These researchers argue that, for independent thinking to develop, it is essential that learners interact with fellow students and staff in learning communities (Anderson and Garrison 1995).

In the South Pacific, with its vast distances and many isolated communities, the conditions in which some distance learners study are particularly difficult. Access to books, newspapers, libraries, science labs, computers and other learning resources is limited and, in spite of the use of telecommunications (phone, fax, radio, satellite, email), so is interaction with the tutor and other students. The use of the Internet, seen by some as the perfect solution to these problems, is at present restricted in many parts of the region by an insufficient number of phone lines, a narrow bandwidth, and unreliable hardware servicing.

How do distance learners manage to study in spite of these adverse conditions? In a study of USP distance learners, we interviewed students in seven of the 12 countries of the region (Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu) about the way they approach studying, the conditions in which they study, and what they think learning is all about. (For details, see Landbeck and Mugler, forthcoming; Mugler and Landbeck 1998 and forthcoming). In this article, we very briefly summarise the conditions faced by these students, and then describe the situation of a distance learner in a remote area.

For the USP distance learners we interviewed, study revolves around their course package. The package allows Extension students - unlike their on-campus colleagues - to study at their own pace. This flexibility is appreciated by those who have already had some experience studying independently, but students who are new to the Extension mode have to develop self-discipline and learn to organise their studies, manage their time, and juggle studies with the demands of work, family life, and community activities.

Although the course package is meant to be sufficient, additional resources can only help. For many students, the main learning resource is the library, either at a USP Centre or Sub-Centre, or at a high school. Some also go to government departments and other organisations to gather information for specific assignments. However, for many students in remote areas, there are either very few resources or none at all. Similarly, isolated students often cannot take advantage of tutorials, whether these are face-to-face or satellite tutorials with a teacher, or peer tutorials with other students taking the course. Tutorials, of course, provide guidance on the subject matter of the course and allow time for discussions on readings and assignments, work on self-assessment questions, and preparation for exams. But they are also an opportunity for a broader exchanges of ideas, and discussions about study problems and study tactics; they help break down isolation and provide much needed psychological support. The
isolated student misses out on both these fronts.

The lack of face-to-face contact with a tutor is perhaps the feature of distance learning which is the most keenly felt by isolated students. There is no one to guide, correct, or answer questions on the spot, and this creates feelings of uncertainty. Feedback on assignments is often the only individualised guidance the learner receives from the faraway tutor and, if it is inadequate, as sometimes happens, confusion and frustration follow.

In spite of limited access to resources and tutors, some isolated students still manage to pass courses and get more out of their studies than one would expect. We now turn to such a student, Melanie (not her real name).

Melanie is a high school leaver who lives with her parents on a small island off Munda, in the Western Province of Solomon Islands. To meet the interviewer, she had paddled her canoe across the lagoon. After finishing Form 5 in 1993 at a high school in her home province, she started studying by Extension. She completed the Preliminary level (Form 6), then went on to Foundation courses (Form 7). At the time of the interview, she was taking Mathematics and History/Politics, and needed one more course to complete her Foundation studies. She had been awarded a scholarship to study computer science and was waiting to hear where she would be sent.

When asked about studying by Extension, Melanie immediately emphasises the positive: it's easier to concentrate; she lives at home, so there's no need to worry about expenses for food or travel, unlike when she was living in the capital, Honiara, while she was in Forms 1-3; she is sheltered from the influences of friends and the attractions of town. She describes their life on the small island as 'simple'. They don't have electricity and at night she studies by the light of a hurricane lamp; when the rainwater in the tanks runs out, which fortunately happens rarely, they have to go to the main island to get water; they often go fishing.

She gets a lot of encouragement. Her parents have arranged for two high school maths teachers to come and tutor her at weekends. Every two weeks on Friday, they pick up one or the other tutor at their schools, one of which is 25 km away, the other even farther, and take the tutor back on Saturday. While Melanie has no tutor for her History/Politics course, she has a lot of reading material and her father helps her. When she was in high school, she admits, she didn't study hard and spent a lot of time with her friends. She failed. 'I was very young and I didn't take it seriously', she says. At first, she didn't want to study by Extension but her parents insisted, convinced that she could do better: 'We have plans for you', they said. Now, she likes it and concludes, 'being on my own is very good' (p. 7 of the interview transcript).

Melanie is well-organised, follows the timetable and spends several hours every day studying. Her parents want her to concentrate on her studies, so they keep her involvement in chores and other pursuits to a minimum. Although there are no libraries where she lives, she sometimes goes and asks questions of people who work in government offices. Both her parents are educated and help her. Her father is a church minister and has a theological background as well as a diploma in business, while her mother runs a secretarial service in English from home. When Melanie works on an assignment, she'll show her father a draft once she is satisfied with it. Sometimes he'll say 'you have to put some more ideas there' (p. 14) and she'll go back and revise on her own, until they are both satisfied.

At the end of the interview, when she is asked if there is anything else she'd like to say about studying and learning, she gives credit to her 'network', as she calls it:

Oh, in my study I've been encouraged a lot by my parents and my tutor. Without them, if I have done this
learning by myself, maybe I couldn't have been a success, because my tutor and my parents and I work together (p. 28).

In Melanie's experience as a distance learner, great isolation and very limited resources have been offset by a tremendous level of support. In what one might regard as adverse circumstances, she has focussed on the advantages of her situation and made the most of her opportunities, inspired by her parents' faith in her, helped by their ingenuity, and sustained by their steady commitment, along with the academic and psychological support of her tutors. Clearly, she sees the enterprise as a team effort, far removed from some of our Extension students' cry of 'it's only you and the books' (Mugler & Landbeck 1998). Unfortunately, not every isolated student benefits from such support.

References


Landbeck, R. and F. Mugler (Forthcoming) South Pacific distance learners: study strategies, learning conditions, and consequences for course design. *Journal of Distance Education*.


