

KODE: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COURSES FOR DEVELOPMENT WORKERS

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Introduction

Established in 1974, the mission of Kimmage Development Studies Centre (DSC) is to promote critical thinking and action for justice, equality and the eradication of poverty in the world. It aims to do this through facilitating the education and training of individual practitioners and groups working for social, economic and political change in society, enabling all practitioners to work effectively for the holistic development of all. Kimmage DSC has offered Bachelor of Arts and post-graduate programmes to students from around the world for 38 years. This article discusses the introduction of a new distance learning programme by KODE and considers its benefits for students based on skills-based, focused programmatic content and delivery.

Background

Around 2005, Kimmage DSC made the courageous and enterprising decision to invest in and develop a range of distance learning courses for development workers. The rationale for this exploration of previously untested waters was the recognition that, given the declining number of fellowships and the emerging global economic down-turn, fewer students would be able to travel and study on the Kimmage DSC full-time programmes. Kimmage DSC therefore wanted to provide quality alternatives to studying in Dublin so that a greater number of development workers would have access to the courses that have been so popular over the previous decades. Kimmage DSC's Strategic Plan 2009-2013 states:

“...given that the modes of delivery of learning transcend national or regional (or institutional) boundaries and facilitates study for participants in the widest possible range of venues and locations, we believe that KODE will become an ideal ‘bridge’ between our Irish-based and overseas-based activities”.

Given that the primary aim of the distance learning programme was to provide access to high quality courses, after much research and piloting, it was

decided that the most efficient and effective method of providing course materials was on CD-ROM. The rationale was that CDs can be used in older computers; are not susceptible to computer viruses; and accessing the content is not reliant on an internet connection. Therefore each unit of study can be printed out or viewed on screen. This was decided as the best course delivery option for our potential learners, many of whom are based in remote areas and/or do not have access to reliable internet service. KODE was launched on 3 March 2009 just as the impact of the current economic recession was being felt across Ireland, and Irish overseas development agencies were not immune to its effects. Consequently uptake of the programme in our first year, 2009, was understandably slow. However, we continued to work with full confidence in KODE's ability to respond to, and meet the needs of development workers who often operate within the confines of busy schedules.

The KODE model

The KODE model uses a 'blended' learning package based on the convenience of CD-ROMs, which also includes specialised tutor support and a dedicated website to facilitate discussion. The learning model adopted by KODE facilitates independent study for participants allowing them to work through the course programme at their own pace as they gain understanding and key skills in each subject area. Throughout the course, tutors are available to give guidance and support to participants.

One key to the success of the KODE learning experience is that each participant is assigned a personal tutor. Tutors are graduates of the Kimmage DSC programme and are therefore familiar with the processes that guide the KODE experience. The tutors' continued dedication and commitment to the programme post-graduation is essential to the positive learning experience of participants. One tutor in Tanzania, Ombeni Sakafu, recently commented that 'all the units are useful to development workers. Besides empowering them with new knowledge, they also give them challenges and the opportunity to see the development arena in a wider perspective'. Profiles of each of the KODE tutors are available on the KODE website: <http://www.kodeonline.com>.

The first three KODE courses were based on the existing core project management modules within the Kimmage DSC BA programme. In addition, there is now a course on 'Sustainable Livelihoods and Poverty Reduction', and a globally unique course on 'Gender-Based Violence and Development' which will be finalised and launched later in 2011. KODE courses range in length

between five and ten weeks. Courses include a number of assignments and, crucially, on-line discussion forums which facilitate discussion among the course participants in different countries on issues of common concern related to the course content. Beatrice Elachi, Executive Director of the League of Kenya Women Voters, commented that ‘the discussions also opened our minds and the wealth of knowledge we have received will guide us to the next level of our careers’.

All KODE courses have a set start date and are run simultaneously in a number of countries so that participants can benefit from group interaction regardless of how geographically dispersed they are. The KODE learning model provides balance between structured instruction and guided discovery which ensures the engagement of the students from beginning to end.

The course content engages participants through the use of case studies and additional exercises that allow participants to monitor their own learning throughout. Each course also has a 'toolbox' of real life resources from established development organisations willing to share their expertise. Sophia Chayalew Kassa, Early Childhood Development Officer at ChildFund in Ethiopia, stated after completing the KODE Monitoring & Evaluation Course: ‘KODE perfectly met my objectives. The material provided was easy to read and understand and supported by practical examples’.

Participant feedback

Although promoting a new training programme during bleak economic circumstances does not go without its challenges the feedback from course participants in the two years since the launch of KODE show how they have applied their learning to their development work which has made the effort worthwhile. Vincent Bukenya, Senior Programme Assistant at the World Food Programme in Uganda commented that:

“Unit by unit, and reference material after another, the course package gave ample time towards each of its objectives. The course stood out as ‘learner-friendly’, enabling a participant to understand the complexities of sustainable development and to critically reflect on their experience. I highly enjoyed the Sustainable Livelihoods course”.

Almost one hundred development workers based in eight countries completed KODE courses in 2010. These participants utilised the interactive website to

learn about and meet others working in the development sector during and after each course. This gave them the potential to communicate and identify as a community of practice. The programme has been adapted to meet expectations, facilitating maximum numbers regardless of geographic location so KODE courses are now available globally. KODE has the capacity to supply participants with course packs including subject CDs and detailed study guides anywhere in the world. In order to aid the distance learner, we also have short instructional videos available on the website to guide participants through the functions of the on-line discussion forum etc.

KODE's approach has a practical focus which appeals to development workers on the ground, including Veronica Kabasomi, Social Worker, Caritas Fort Portal, Uganda:

“I can now assure you that through the *Project Management, Governance and Accountability* course I am comfortable with issues about governing projects, accountability, income and expenditure accounts, budgeting and balance sheets. KODE courses are very relevant to our needs and the skills they are given are practical, applicable and not abstract”.

Shadrack Musyoka, Monitoring & Evaluation Officer for the Diocese of Kitui, Kenya also commented:

“KODE's approach is more practical than theoretical. At this point in my career, I did not think I needed more theory but rather practical ideas that I could apply to work. The flexibility is refreshing and the access to the tutor wonderful. I enjoyed asking questions and discussion it was intellectually exhilarating”.

The courses have great benefits in developing the capacity of individuals and potentially the organisation within which they operate. An excellent example of how a participant has brought the benefits of KODE to her organisation's beneficiaries was demonstrated through the following comment from Jacinta Mwangi from the Live With Hope Centre, Kenya:

“My organisation supports people with HIV/AIDS and there are a lot of activities to be monitored and evaluated to ensure these people get the best services and improve their quality of life. KODE really helped me so much and reading through those case studies I was able to measure my

organisation and learn a lot from them. I still continue to refer to the materials”.

In the future, KODE intends to further its geographical reach to continue providing access to Kimmage DSC where there was none previously. The KODE educational experience is continuously fine tuned and hopes to attract high-level practitioners and academics to join in the on-line discussion forum so that learners can have first hand access to a wide range of experience and knowledge.

Conclusion

KODE has a vital role to play in providing skills-based, focussed, programmatic content which, according to the feedback from our 2010 participants, is both personally and professional transforming. Graduates are also returning to KODE programmes in other areas of study: Sr Patricia Hanvey, despite being based in a remote, difficult to access part of Zambia, has now undertaken all four KODE courses and may also participate in our *Gender Based Violence and Development* course. This is an advantage of KODE courses being available globally with additional face-to-face one-day introductory workshops in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Ethiopia. KODE courses include: project planning and proposal writing; monitoring and evaluation; project management, governance and accountability; and sustainable livelihoods and poverty reduction. KODE will launch its new *Gender-Based Violence and Development* course in April 2011. Application forms, details of course fees, course outlines, tutor profiles, recent participant feedback are all available on the KODE website: <http://www.kodeonline.com>.

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