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Training is an essential part of the professional development of staff working for international humanitarian organizations. While humanitarian workers are being deployed around the world to provide life-saving relief assistance in often-hazardous missions, it is imperative for organizations to ensure that staff members understand the mission and protocol of their organizations and that they develop an appreciation for the impact their work has on beneficiaries. Demand for such training has been expanding exponentially over the last decade with the growing number of humanitarian organizations and personnel. In the United Nations alone, an estimated 37,000 civilian personnel are being employed as part of UN humanitarian operations, an increase of 54% since 1997; 75% of this personnel is composed of national staff of the countries of operation (United Nations, 2008). With the increasing reliance of humanitarian organizations on national staff to manage their field operations, the professional development of staff members poses an ever-growing challenge due to the remoteness and distribution of staff, limiting organizations' ability to maintain the coherence and cogency of their mission and methods. Although many international humanitarian organizations have adopted some form of distance learning into their staff training, few organizations have evaluated the effectiveness of their distance learning programs. This research briefly evaluates the literature relevant to the use of distance learning for training professional staff in the humanitarian field, assesses how distance learning programs are being used among select humanitarian organizations based in the USA, and reviews the results of a pilot distance learning course offered to mid-career professionals working on international humanitarian issues in a professional capacity.

Keywords: distance education; humanitarian practice; international humanitarian law; professional training

Distance learning in humanitarian action

There is a wide acknowledgement within the humanitarian community that traditional training methods are inadequate to meet the rising demand for professional training in humanitarian action. The demand for greater professional training in humanitarian action has led to a proliferation of academic programs offering either master's degrees or semester-long certification programs in the humanitarian field and a proliferation of online courses and training programs offered by international governmental and non-governmental organizations. Examples of academic programs offering certification, master's degrees, or executive education programs in humanitarian action include the Global Master of Arts Program at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (Tufts University, 2007), the Master in Professional Studies for Humanitarian Services Administration (University of Connecticut,

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n.d.), and the International Diploma in Humanitarian Action: Theory and Application (Fordham University, 2006). Examples of UN and international non-governmental organizations' use of distance learning are discussed at length in the section on review of experience.

Meeting the demand for professional development in the humanitarian arena includes challenges unique to this field. In particular, many professionals working on conflict prevention, peace building, and security management operate in politically, socially, and economically underprivileged locations around the world. A large number of humanitarian organization staff operate in remote areas that are physically difficult to access or where travel is hampered by political or social turmoil. One lesson that emerged in conversations with humanitarian organizations is that the need to reach these segments of the humanitarian community is a driving motivation underlying many humanitarian organization distance learning training programs including, but by no means limited to organizations such as the American Red Cross, the United Nations Department of Safety and Security, the United Nations Children's Fund, and the Peace Operations Training Institute.

Beyond the difficulties of reaching humanitarian professionals in remote and insecure areas, purveyors of training in humanitarian action face additional challenges. First, the international humanitarian community comprises individuals with very different interests and professional experiences. This community includes all forms of private organizations, local non-governmental organizations, international non-governmental organizations, and international governmental organizations. International humanitarian organizations have diverse missions and different areas of expertise and unique strategies for engaging local beneficiaries. These organizations also vary considerably in size, resource base, sources of funding, and technical capacity (Aall, Miltenberger, & Weiss, 2000).

Second, there is considerable turnover among international humanitarian staff working for international governmental and non-governmental organizations. Many staff members are hired on short-term contracts. Individuals rarely stay in the employ of a single organization for longer than five years. A high staff turnover rate poses serious challenges to humanitarian organizations, making it difficult for them to incorporate and institutionalize lessons learned and to build off the skills individuals acquire during their tenure with the organization (Loquercio, Hammersley, & Emmens, 2006).

Third, international, expatriate staff members are responsible for the operational and strategic management of international agency programs in the field. These international staff members receive security training and are incorporated into country teams to manage programs. Yet, during an acute phase of a crisis these international staff members are often relocated out of the country, leaving a skeletal local staff only. Though local staff members bear the weight of the security risk for the organization, they are the least well trained and are afforded the fewest privileges in terms of access to relevant resources and information (Stoddard, Harmer, & Haver, 2006).

Fourth, with the advent of 'An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-keeping' (United Nations, 1992) and the follow-on 'Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations' (United Nations, 2000), greater emphasis has been placed on identifying international standards for peace operations with a commitment to professional training of staff. There is an expectation that staff members require standard training and must have basic technical competence to fulfill the mission of the organization. Moreover, there must be some way for each organization to ensure continuity of its programs in the field as new staff members rotate into decision-making positions. Staff members must have access to key information sources and networks of professionals to accomplish their mission objectives and each organization must build some capacity to

monitor and evaluate its own programs and those programs undertaken by implementing partners.

Fifth, international non-governmental organizations are notoriously independent minded and sometimes resist the standardization of their operations and practices. Yet, as staff members and international humanitarian organization programs come under increasing threat to their safety, agencies will be held accountable for their actions and will be required to demonstrate due diligence in their training and preparation. This calls for standardization of training and implementation of monitoring and evaluation measures (Tong, 2004).

The move toward greater accountability of international humanitarian organizations for the safety and security of their staff and for measurable impact of their operations and programs has necessitated the standardization and expansion of their training programs. Yet, as emphasized earlier, thousands of staff members of these organizations work around the globe, sometimes in inhospitable and remote areas. The capacity of most agencies to deliver quality training using traditional in-class training methods is unrealistic and inefficient (Schoenhaus, 2002).

Research project

To improve understanding of the way international humanitarian organizations develop and deliver their training to their international staff, the Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research (HPCR) at Harvard University undertook a pilot project in 2007 to review the distance learning programs of a few major international humanitarian organizations, to review the scholarly literature on distance learning applied to humanitarian action, and to test the feasibility of scaling up its own training programs through the development of a pilot course on international humanitarian law. The purpose of the pilot course was to test the technical feasibility of delivering an introductory self-paced course on international humanitarian law to international staff of international humanitarian organizations. The results of this research inspired the development by the Program at Harvard of a series of online professional development tools centered on a new professional community platform, (Humanitarian Law and Policy Forum, accessible at http://ihlforum.ning.com). Designed to serve the needs of the humanitarian community, the platform offers open access to a series of online courses on humanitarian law, and to forum discussions and monthly interactive seminars where participants can comment live on current challenges to the protection of civilians. The platform was launched in June 2008. In the first six weeks of activities, more than 2000 professionals from 146 countries registered for the courses, over 1800 hours of online courses were delivered, and over 350 participants took part in two live seminars (HPCR, 2008).

Definitions

For the purposes of this research, distance learning refers to the delivery of an online course where learning takes place in a physical location different from where teaching is taking place (Moore & Shattuck, 2001). In short, the learners never physically meet the instructors nor do they meet one another. Distance learning is sometimes referred to in the literature as e-learning, distance education, online learning, and distributed learning (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005). Distance learning may include online learning, although as with correspondence courses this may not always be the case. Distance learning may be offered

as a stand-alone course or training module or might be part of a hybrid course that incorporates some face-to-face contact time.

The purpose of distance learning courses may vary considerably. In some instances distance learning may be used to provide new information and create a basis for acquiring knowledge as with many university-based education courses where access to the course may be open (as with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Open Courseware) or restricted to enrolled students (most universities), free or at-cost. Other distance learning courses may be designed to provide first-time certification or re-certification for the development of new skills or for honing skills already acquired, for example, the Harvard Medical School Department of Continuing Education at http://cmeonline.med.harvard.edu (Harvard College, 2008). Certification courses of this kind may be used for professional advancement, to provide shared knowledge, or to create a network of professionals around a specific issue area.

Similarly, the structure of distance learning varies with some modules providing very specific information that may be completed in less than a day while other distance learning courses comprise many learning elements and may last several months. Distance learning courses may be offered asynchronously or synchronously or in a combination of both. Distance learning courses may include video lectures, audio lectures, and access to readings. Distance learning courses may or may not include discussion sections, blogs, wikis, utilize streaming video and audio, video or audio podcasts, simulation technology, or not. In the humanitarian sector all of these options are available, in some instances to the entire community of humanitarian professionals and in other cases to a restricted number of professionals within an organization. Examples of the variety of different distance learning programs employed in the humanitarian field are discussed in detail below.

Literature on distance learning and humanitarian action

The review of experience with humanitarian organizations based in the USA (below) suggests that the humanitarian community has embraced distance learning as a medium for building knowledge, standardizing training, teaching new skills, and disseminating information about projects. Yet, no single study exists that systematically maps the use of distance learning among humanitarian organizations. This is a significant gap in the literature on the application of distance learning in the humanitarian field.

Some authors have looked at the proliferation of information technologies among humanitarian organizations and suggested that this is promising for the potential to utilize distance learning but none has examined how many organizations use distance learning and how important distance learning is for their respective training programs (Dufresne & Bethke, 2005). All of the international non-governmental organizations, UN organizations, and academic institutions with humanitarian action programs reviewed have prodigiously embraced distance learning. Yet, few of these organizations have systematized their approach and evaluated the impact of their programs.

Merisotis and Phipps (1999) found a lack of studies dedicated to measuring the effectiveness of total academic programs taught using distance learning. These authors have suggested that most comparative or descriptive studies focus only on individual courses. In the humanitarian field, there are virtually no empirical studies to provide baseline data that could be used to evaluate distance learning programs. Scholars, policy-makers, and practitioners must look to the distance learning literature in other fields to make inferences about its potential transformative power in humanitarian action. Education is one of the areas where scholarship on distance learning is abundant.

In the field of education, scholars have suggested that

> the transformative power of e-learning has nothing to do with access to information but improved ways to process, and make sense of this information … To be successful, e-learning must confer upon participants the ability to think critically and solve their own problems, not simply cite facts. (Garrison & Anderson, 2003, p. 4)

Yet, in the humanitarian field most distance learning is geared toward information dissemination and information sharing, not in developing critical thinking or in breaking apart stovepiped information that moves from the field to headquarters and principally among international staff members.

'Educational experience is about constructing meaning from a personal perspective and confirming this understanding collaboratively within a community of learners' (Garrison & Anderson, 2003, p. 13). The humanitarian community has not adopted distance learning technologies for this purpose though the transformative potential is evident. Distance learning might be used to effect the standardization of training and disseminate lessons learned from the experiences of some to be shared broadly with all. Distance learning tools may plausibly be used to level the playing field among different sorts of international humanitarian organizations and other actors assuming humanitarian responsibilities.

Humanitarian organizations have an historic opportunity to substitute self-organizing communities of practice for the ever-illusive desire to coordinate and share lessons among humanitarians across agencies. A social constructivist model of learning is one where students develop and produce their own knowledge; they are not merely recipients of information (Dede, Brown-L'Bahy, & Whitehouse, 2002). This is a particularly strong method for creating common vocabularies and shared problem-solving techniques to resolve problems that affect a wider professional community. A social constructivist approach may be used to foster the development of virtual communities of practice (Dede et al., 2002, p. 7).

Garrison and Anderson (2003) suggested that there are three constituent elements of a 'community of inquiry,' which is referred to here as a community of practice. First, there must be cognitive presence where learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse. A second essential component is social presence, 'the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally as real people' (p. 29). Finally, teaching presence is needed to facilitate both the cognitive development and social process of the community to 'ensure the realization of educationally worthwhile learning outcomes' (p. 57).

In one empirical study examining online communities, a survey was used to measure the sense of community in an online course. The survey measured perceptions of sense of community, online facilitation, social presence, perceived technology effectiveness, and overall course satisfaction. Notably, 'teaching facilitation was found to have the strongest positive correlation with sense of community' (Liu, Magjuka, & Lee, 2006, p. 10).

The potential benefits of establishing communities of practice within the humanitarian community are apparent. For one, communities of practice may begin to mitigate the perennial lack of institutional learning often attributed to high staff turnover. To be sure, the 'wide array of actors, international and local, each have critical information but do not have an effective means of communicating with one another' (Barton, von Hippel, & Linder, 2006, p. 6). The development of self-sustaining communities of practice introduced through distance learning courses offers the option of building networks that create continuity where none currently exists, due in part to high rates of staff turnover.

Ziesche (2007) examined the potential for using blogs and wikis during humanitarian emergencies to report on conditions on the ground. He suggested that these media would

enable aid workers to get a better picture of what is happening, more quickly than can be done with standard situation reports and press releases. Claims about authenticity would be controlled by gatekeepers and by self-regulation within the reporting community. Tagging would be used to order and retrieve information. Ziesche suggested that the UN could provide a single website for a disaster where individuals are able to establish their own blogs. The bottom line is that more information is provided more quickly during an emergency than is possible through traditional reporting mechanisms.

Communities of learners may de facto supersede or transgress the bureaucratic structures of international humanitarian organizations thereby bridging that other famous problem in the humanitarian field, inadequate coordination among organizations (Stephenson, 2005; Tong, 2004). At the same time, communities of practice are not a panacea to all challenges. Moreover, humanitarian and distance learning cannot be exclusively about generating such communities; rather, the purpose is also education with the goal of achieving defined learning outcomes and promoting cognitive development (Stodel, Thompson, & MacDonald, 2006). Given the diversity of needs among humanitarian professionals, it is also important that technology be matched to the diverse needs of users (McCombs & Vakili, 2005, p. 1595).

Although distance learning courses and communities of practice hold much potential for transforming the practices of the humanitarian community, it is still too early in their development to make valid inferences about their impact. With respect to the humanitarian field at least, 'there is still no distinctive online pedagogy for the delivery of distance education courses and core technologies have yet to emerge and stabilize' (Natriello, 2005, p. 1898). Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University, has suggested that distance learning is still conceived as an 'add-on to traditional teaching programs' (Bok, 2007). Maeroff and Zemsky (2007) are more critical:

> Higher education has been too tied to the Web. The Web is a wonderful distribution system, but it is a communications device, not a learning device. That is why Blackboard is so successful. It is not a learning platform – it is a communications tool. Watch what young people in college do with the Web. They use Wikipedia. Even more they use Facebook or MySpace. (p. B20)

Review of experience

The variety of distance learning resources for humanitarian action is large and expanding rapidly. Only a fraction of humanitarian organizations with distance learning programs were considered for the review of experience (see Appendix 1). The sample includes a wide range of distance learning training courses and modules offered by large, well-established international governmental organizations and international non-governmental organizations doing humanitarian action work. Specifically, only US-headquartered humanitarian international and non-governmental organizations with international programs were selected. Among this subset of humanitarian international organizations, only those providing training in international humanitarian law were selected.

Literature published on each organization's website was reviewed for a description of the purpose of the distance learning programs. Semi-structured interviews with staff members responsible for either the design or management of each organization's distance learning program were conducted from February through April of 2007. Five interviews were conducted at Harvard University, two at UN agencies, and five with major international non-governmental organizations. Harvard University was the focus of interviews because it provided the physical location of the distance learning pilot and provided the course management system employed in this pilot.

Interviewees were asked to comment on the general purpose of their distance learning program, the design of the distance education course or training including a description of the teaching pedagogy, the sustainability of the program (through grant money or cost-recovery model), marketing or advertisement of courses, and methods for evaluating course content, facilitation, and course design.

The purpose of the review of experience was the identification of best practices in distance learning for training and education in humanitarian action. The results of this review of experience and the review of literature informed the teaching pedagogy used in the development of the HPCR pilot distance learning course on international humanitarian law.

Interview questions were designed to evoke discussion on each of the following topics:

- General context: the purpose of the distance learning program
- Course design: the basic elements of the course structure and pedagogy
- Target audience: groups that are targeted – internal vs. external
- Evaluation: how distance learning was evaluated by the organization.

General context

One clear impression garnered from interviewing staff members of these international organizations is that distance learning is being emphatically embraced as a medium for delivering skills training and information sometimes to the broader public but more commonly to the internal staff members of each organization. The evidence for this is strictly anecdotal and the vignettes discussed here are not a substitute for empirical evidence of the proliferation of distance learning in the humanitarian sector. Research is needed to illustrate how distance learning is being used as a training tool in the humanitarian sector and what impact distance learning programs have had on staff acquisition of skills and knowledge.

There are many reasons why distance learning has taken on a more important role in the training and education programs of international organizations, the most significant of which appears to be the expediency of reaching a large number of geographically dispersed staff members at more-efficient cost. However, among the more interesting and less obvious reasons for the rapid growth of distance learning capacity is the need to address what is perceived by some (donors especially) as a lack of accountability for the outcome and impact of humanitarian programs.

In this context, distance learning is seen as one means for disseminating information about an organization's mandate and for ensuring that its staff are compliant with a standard set of procedures and practices concerning security, delivery of aid according to humanitarian principles, guidelines for engaging other types of actors in the field including the military and other armed groups, and for monitoring and evaluating program impact on beneficiaries.

Course design and target audience

How distance learning training courses have been organized (modules, full courses, utilizing asynchronous or synchronous elements, blended learning, inclusion of video, simulation technology, discussion forums, blogs, or wikis) depends very much on the specific purpose of the individual program (skills training, certification, information sharing, or knowledge enhancement) and its target audience (public vs. internal staff) and whether the material is introductory in nature or advanced. Typically, distance learning courses that offer skills training or are used for information sharing purposes are provided free of cost.

This is true both for academic courses such as those offered by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which provides free access through its Open Courseware Project, as well as for independent course modules that lead to certification, as with the United States Institute of Peace, which offers a certificate in conflict analysis.

In many cases, universities have adopted distance learning to tap into and extend their reach to professional communities that are interested in executive education but cannot step out of their careers to enroll in a program. Many universities are offering executive and continuing education programs to humanitarian professionals. This is true for Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government (Harvard University, n.d.), the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (Tufts University, 2007), and the University of Connecticut (University of Connecticut, n.d.).

International governmental and non-governmental organizations more commonly adopt distance learning as a vehicle for disseminating humanitarian principles, as a means of standardizing and ensuring the adoption of new skills, and as a way to improve their accountability to beneficiaries and donors. To achieve these objectives, most organizations have adopted the simplest course design and methods for delivery. The single course module that results in some form of technical certification is by far the most common form. To reach the greatest number of staff (some of these are also open to the general public), organizations have relied on paper-based correspondence courses or CD-based training modules.

This is true for organizations such as the Peace Operations Training Institute: since 1995, the Peace Operations Training Institute has used CD- and paper-based correspondence courses to train more than 40,000 UN staff members, including the basics of international humanitarian law, human rights, and international organization to UN peacekeepers in preparation for peacekeeping missions. On a more limited basis, two dozen students annually complete a full certificate program. These courses are not obligatory.

Similarly, the United Nations Department for Safety and Security (UNDSS) offers courses in Basic Security in the Field – Staff Safety, Health, and Welfare (with a focus on headquarter issues) and Advanced Security in the Field (with a focus on field issues), which are obligatory for all UN staff but are also publicly available (C. Gilbert & M. Phelps, personal communication, 9 April 2007). More than 25,000 people have taken the basic security course. Both courses are CD-based but may also be downloaded from their website and run locally on a user's computer. A certificate is issued upon completion of each course. The UNDSS uses its distance learning program as a strategic asset for ensuring standardization of and professionalization of their training. Distance training supplements, but does not replace all core staff training which UNDSS offers through the UN Staff College in Torino, Italy, and with training visits to its field missions. Distance learning is used to supplement traditional learning and reinforce or refresh core security skills.

Organizations such as the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) offer an online certificate course in conflict analysis (M. Brown, M. Lekson, & P. Aall, personal communication, 10 April 2007). The USIP Certificate Course in Conflict Analysis utilizes asynchronous case-based learning pedagogy drawing on peer-reviewed research with expert testimony offered through audio and video testimony. This is a good example of a knowledge-building course that offers participants an analytic framework for identifying common patterns across otherwise unlike cases, allowing the practitioner to draw inferences about appropriate actions that might be taken by the international community to prevent or mitigate the impact of violent conflict.

The United Nations Children's Programme (UNICEF) developed a distance learning program, Principled Approach to Humanitarian Action (PATH), to disseminate to their staff core humanitarian principles (W. Gikonyo, personal communication, 9 April 2007). The

PATH program is used to supplement UNICEF's core training by providing staff with 'the knowledge and practical know-how to face these challenges (of working in a conflict environment) and better protect children affected by humanitarian crises.' The course aims to provide staff with the knowledge they need to 'respect humanitarian principles and apply international legal standards in conflict situations' (W. Gikonyo, personal communication, 9 April 2007).

PATH is a prerequisite for taking a traditional training program on humanitarian action. This 10-week blended learning program is offered in partnership with the Netherlands' University of Maastricht with core curriculum co-developed by the two partners. There is two weeks of face-to-face time with the remainder of the course material offered at a distance. Participants are evaluated through an end-of-term policy paper. Students that pass the course receive credits from the University of Maastricht. This is one of the few distance learning programs utilized by international organizations that includes the type of evaluation process commonly found in a university setting and highlights a potential benefit of collaboration among international organizations, universities, and research institutes.

Finally, the American Red Cross uses distance learning to supplement core skills training for their staff and for trainers (B. Crean, personal communication, 10 April 2007). The Red Cross utilizes a train-the-trainer teaching model for most of its skill teaching courses. A blended learning approach was adopted as some skills like CPR and first aid require face-to-face time. Distance learning was used to minimize the physical time needed in the classroom. At first, the Red Cross utilized an asynchronous video-driven pedagogy, but it is now adding a synchronous component to its training. Demand for synchronous education was commonly cited in the interviews. In all cases, traditional training programs were taken as a model for developing distance learning courses and both course content and learning objectives were borrowed from traditional training courses. Despite the transformative potential of distance learning, no clear online learning pedagogies have emerged in the humanitarian community.

Analysis of review of experience (evaluation)

Drawing general inferences about such disparate programs is challenging, particularly in light of the paucity of internal assessments and independent evaluations. Nonetheless, some preliminary observations merit consideration. The first is that there are no clear methods for how to build social networks or communities of practice in humanitarian action through distance learning. From our experience with the pilot online course we offered (more below) and conversations with interviewees, it was evident that participants of distance learning courses felt disconnected from other participants and they were ambivalent about participating in a professional online social network with individuals they had not already met. Building professional trust at a distance presents an obstacle to engendering a community of practice among professional staff not otherwise already engaged with their peers.

Second, there is a pronounced absence of baseline data on distance learning programs for humanitarian action. There are few empirical studies that evaluate the professional relevance of distance learning programs or studies that assess participant comprehension of course material. Little is known about how professionals incorporate course concepts into their work. In many cases, distance learning has been perceived as a technical solution for expanding the reach of an organization without due consideration for how this medium affects student learning, sense of community, and professional development.

Third, the transformative potential of distance learning remains largely unrecognized. Whereas technology and communications create possibilities for breaking down barriers

within humanitarian organizations between headquarters and the field or between international expatriate staff and field staff, this has not yet happened. Nor have distance learning courses closed the cultural lacunae that separate humanitarian organizations from each other.

Finally, there is a real challenge to recover the considerable production costs associated with producing quality distance learning products, particularly outside of the university setting. For humanitarian organizations there is an underlying expectation that their programs and products are provided to the community at little or no direct cost. Yet, humanitarian organizations must fund the cost of digitally recording video and audio, editing these media, creating course websites, and managing course registration and participation. Where distance learning is used to provide skills training for an organization's own staff, these costs will have to be subsumed under a departmental budget. Where organizations provide training for the broader humanitarian community, choices are limited to relying on donors to fund projects or to buck the trend and provide courses for a fee.

HPCR distance learning pilot course

The HPCR designed an online pilot course on international humanitarian law to test the feasibility of engaging in a critical discourse on international humanitarian law with a professional community at a distance (Zhang, 2005). Material for the online course was derived from a full-week face-to-face course, International Humanitarian Law and Current Conflicts: New Challenges and Dilemmas, offered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, by the Program in cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross. Following Choi and Johnson (2005) five lectures were digitally recorded and comprised the individual modules offered. Choi and Johnson have demonstrated that 'video-based instruction can be an effective method to enhance learners' retention in context-based learning' (p. 225).

The online pilot course ran for seven weeks from 10 December 2007 through 18 January 2008. It was designed to evaluate the demand for international humanitarian law courses online, identify the rate of attrition for completion of the course for confirmed course registrants, test the technology to identify advantages and limits of a course management system designed and managed by Harvard University, and evaluate the cognitive performance of online participants as compared to a like population that took the same lecture modules in the face-to-face course.

The online pilot course comprised five lecture modules, corresponding background readings, and teaching objectives. The lectures addressed:

- Introduction to international humanitarian law
- Distinction between civilians and combatants
- Protection of civilians
- Interplay between IHL and human rights
- Implementation monitoring and enforcement.

The five lecture modules were captured using digital video and audio. These lecture sessions were recordings of a live training course delivered on 16 July 2007, at a training seminar, Advanced Training on International Humanitarian Law in Current Conflicts: New Challenges and Dilemmas. Alumni of HPCR in-person trainings were invited by email to join in HPCR's distance learning initiative pilot program. Roughly 100 individuals were contacted in this way. These individuals all share a common professional interest in international humanitarian law and are in the employ of international non-governmental or international governmental organizations. All participants agreed to submit quizzes that

tested their knowledge of the content for each of the five lectures as well as to submit survey forms evaluating the lecture design and professional relevance of each of the five sessions. A list of the organizations represented in the sample is included in Appendix 2. Descriptive statistics for the in-class results and online results were tabulated and used to evaluate the performance and experience of participant learning in a class environment compared with participant learning online.

A course management system, called *Course iSites*, developed by Harvard University's iCommons group was used to host the online course video lectures and readings as well as instructions, quizzes, and evaluation forms. The iCommons platform was selected because it provided a convenient and university-supported resource that could be used to deliver the training. Because HPCR is itself a program seated under the Harvard School of Public Health and because the pilot was funded by a grant from Harvard University, the use of Course iSites was a logical choice over the purchase of commercial software or other open source alternative that would have included a learning curve in developing the course management system.

A targeted email campaign was used to solicit participation in the study. Participants were selected on the basis of their professional background and organization. Specifically, applicants that had applied for, but could not then take the face-to-face training were recruited as well as colleagues of participants that had taken the face-to-face training. Participants in the online course were not selected at random. Rather, the same selection criteria used for selecting participants for the face-to-face course were used to ensure that the two populations were comparable. In all cases, participants to HPCR trainings have worked for international non-governmental or international governmental organizations for a minimum of five years.

An email was sent to participants on 1 October 2007, inviting them to participate in the HPCR distance learning pilot course and asking them to take each of the five recorded sessions online and to evaluate their experience. The same set of quiz questions and survey questions used for the in-class sessions were administered online so that the experience and performance of the online population could be compared with that of the in-class population.

A total of 27 participants registered for the online course while 33 participants enrolled in the face-to-face course. In both cases, participants were mid-career staff members with international governmental and non-governmental organizations doing professional work in humanitarian action.

Findings

Of the 27 registered participants in the pilot, 12 completed the course. This is fewer than we expected although the fact that the test was run through the holiday season likely contributed to lower completion percentages than might be expected during a normal period. Preliminary feedback from follow-on interviews with participants suggests that at least three other factors account for low completion rates. First, many international humanitarian staff members are called to go on mission, often unexpectedly, resulting in too little time to complete the course within the designated timeframe. In the humanitarian field, self-paced distance learning courses would be a good option to alleviate some of the burden associated with frequent travel to remote areas. Self-paced distance courses are likely to capture participants that would not otherwise have the time to participate in a course that relied on synchronous discussions or lessons.

Second, even minor obstacles or glitches are a factor. Inconveniences such as forgetting a password or trying to watch streaming video with intermittent Internet access deterred

some participants from proceeding with the course. Participants mentioned being hesitant to raise with the course coordinator issues they felt they should have been able to resolve themselves. This suggests that instructors must play a proactive role and contact participants at intervals throughout the course to monitor progress. In this case, offers of assistance and periodic email reminders were not enough to encourage some of the participants to complete the course.

Third, because no certification or course credit was awarded for completion of the pilot, participants had less at stake than they would have had as participants in a bona fide online course. Also there was no pressure from their professional institution to complete the course as part of mandatory skills training and no tuition was charged for the pilot. In short, there were no embedded disincentives for dropping the course.

There is good reason to expect that by addressing these issues, higher retention rates can be achieved. Even capturing a modest percentage of humanitarian professionals would allow organizations like HPCR to engage numbers of people in orders of magnitude greater than what is possible relying exclusively on face-to-face courses. Given the potential for reaching large numbers of professionals, it is important to know that participants taking courses online are afforded the same quality of training as those taking the course in person.

To compare the performance of the in-class participants with that of the online participants, an evaluation form was created for the course and for each lecture session. The evaluation forms for each lecture session assessed participants' reflections on the course design and professional relevance of the material and tested participant comprehension of the material. Participants were asked to assess course design and professional relevance using a Likert scale to respond to questions (all of the same polarity) for each of the two categories. A numeric value was assigned for each response (disagree = 1, somewhat disagree = 2, etc.) and the mean calculated for each category.

Figure 1 highlights the overall positive assessment of the five lectures both in terms of course design and professional relevance. As might be expected there is some variance across the lectures, reflecting the interest participants had in the particular subject and the quality of the instructor presentation. What is most interesting, however, is that both the online and in-class groups came to essentially the same conclusions about the lectures. This suggests that at least as far as professional utility of the material is concerned it is not essential for participants to be physically present to benefit from course instruction.

Student comprehension was calculated by taking the mean of responses to 27 questions for the five lectures. Mean scores and one standard deviation from the global mean are presented for the in-class group and for the online group in Figure 2. Students were given 15 minutes to complete each of five short quizzes to test their comprehension of the material delivered in each lecture. For both the in-class group and the online group, the mean scores are quite low, 17.79 of 27 for the in-class group (66%) and 16.92 of 27 (63%) for the online group. This is especially surprising for the online group, which had the opportunity to watch the lectures more than once before taking the quiz and where the opportunity existed to enhance their performance by consulting the Internet. The fact that evaluations closed out after 15 minutes and could not be accessed again later increases the reliability of the results of the online group.

As with course design and professional relevance, the mean performance scores of the online and in-class groups are very close. Again, this suggests that participants need not be physically present in the class to learn the material. Somewhat surprising is the larger distribution of scores for the in-class group compared to the online group. The majority of online class participants were well within one standard deviation of the mean for their group. The in-class participants were far less consistent. It is difficult to infer why this is the
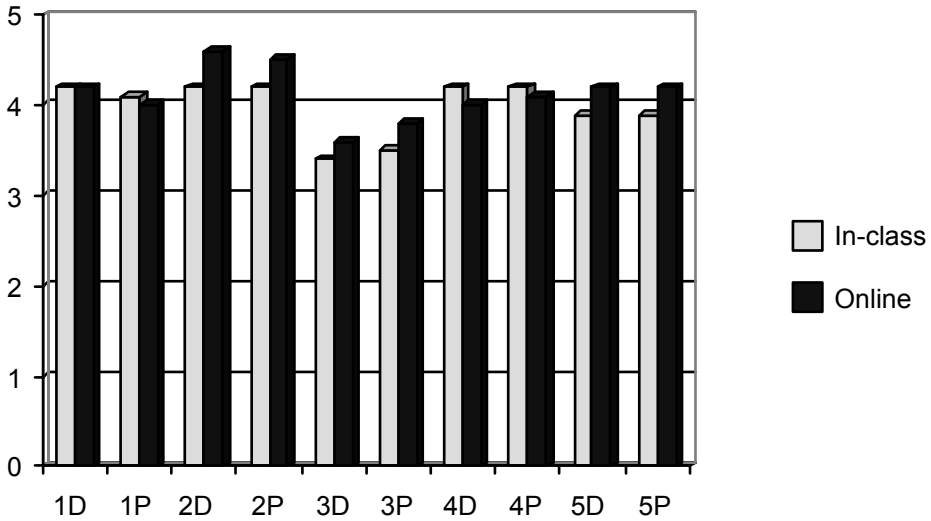
Figure 1. Aggregate student ratings for course lectures. Note: Figure depicts mean Likert scale scores for course design (D) and professional relevance (P) for each of the five course lectures. A score of 5 represents a strong agreement that course design is good (D = aggregate mean of five questions about course design) and that the lecture is professionally relevant (P = aggregate mean of five question responses).

case although one plausible reason may be that because many online registered students did not complete the course, those who did complete it were alike in some respect that was reflected in more consistent performance. There are too few cases, however, to make a valid inference about the more consistent performance of the online group.
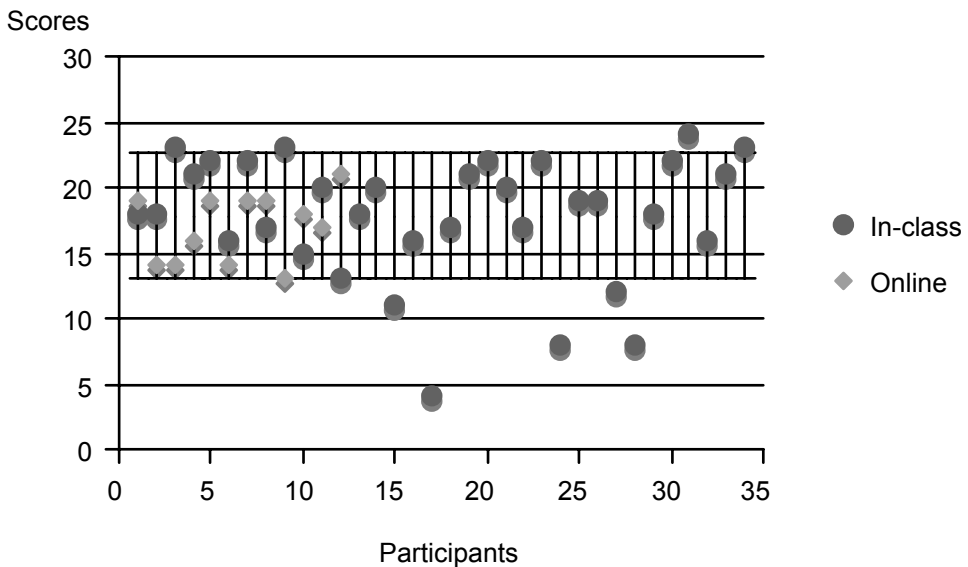

Figure 2. Student performance. Note: Figure depicts mean participant lecture comprehension scores for the in-class group and online group out of a total of 27 possible points. Bands represent one standard deviation around the global mean.

Limits of research

The international humanitarian community has emphatically adopted the use of distance learning courses for education and training. In the majority of cases distance learning has been used to scale up and extend traditional training courses and until now the potential transformative power of distance learning to create communities of practice has not been realized. This research highlights the opportunity costs of not creating such communities considering their potential to address coordination dilemmas and to inculcate within organizational culture evaluation and monitoring processes, increased capacity for institutional learning, and the impact of humanitarian programs on beneficiaries.

This pilot research project demonstrates the technical feasibility of employing distance learning courses to deliver basic and advanced lessons in international humanitarian law to mid-career professionals geographically dispersed around the world. The results of the pilot are encouraging regarding the ability of motivated participants to comprehend the material without the physical presence of an instructor. One of the main limits of the pilot is that it did not test the use of the distance learning course to build a community of practice. The focus on self-paced asynchronous learning was an effective means of evaluating the capacity of individual participants to comprehend international humanitarian law, but this format is not conducive to creating and sustaining a community of practice.

New professional development tools currently developed by the Program at Harvard include instructor-led asynchronous and synchronous sessions as well as a series of discussion tools to introduce participants to one another and the instructor. Participants are invited to register first to a community of professionals and then to access to the online courses, using a Ning platform as an online collaborative environment (HPCR, 2008). Furthermore, the Program is piloting the use of a WebEx platform for dedicated event and training activities, opening new avenues for interactive video and audio exchanges with participants from all over the world. These measures are currently being evaluated for their potential to engage participants in a process that provides them with an opportunity to address 'intractable' dilemmas in humanitarian action.

Conclusion

Distance learning has been widely adopted by international humanitarian organizations and is likely to play an even more important role for professional training in the future. Yet, few studies are available to assess the impacts of distance learning in this area of educational activity. More studies are needed to evaluate who benefits from distance learning (international vs. national staff) and what impact distance learning has on the work of staff working in this field. This study has demonstrated the technical feasibility of offering courses on international humanitarian law to professionals operating in dispersed areas around the world. Future studies are needed to assess whether communities of practice and professional networking can be effectively created and supported at a distance.

Notes on contributors

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Appendix 1.   Review of experience interviews

Interviews were semi-structured and questions were asked about each organization's experience in these areas:

- Understanding the general context
  - Purpose of the distance learning program
  - Integration of distance learning into your professional strategy
  - Plans for building a community of learners or a professional network beyond each course
- Course design
  - Selection of a learning pedagogy
  - Identification of participant learning objectives
  - Collaboration with other institutions for course development or training
- Resources
  - Criteria for deciding whether to charge for distance courses
  - Means of financing the development of distance courses
- Marketing
  - Methods for advertising your distance courses
  - Identification of legal liabilities associated with course development and delivery
  - Strategy for evaluating other distance learning programs
- Technical
  - Identification of minimum technical requirements for taking distance courses
  - Decisions regarding in-house production of content vs. contracting services
  - Advice for conducting distance courses for staff working in conflict environments
- Evaluation
  - Methods for capturing participant learning objectives and evaluating how these are met by the course
  - Means of evaluating course design and course content

Organizations visited for review of experience

Organization: Harvard Business School
URL: http://www.exed.hbs.edu/
Date: 19 December 2006
Interviewee: Judy Uhl, Managing Director, Technology Enhanced Learning

Organization: Harvard Extension School
URL: http://extension.harvard.edu
Date: 9 January 2007
Interviewee: Henry H. Leitner, Assistant Dean for Information Technology

Organization: Harvard University Instructional Computing Group (ICG)
Date: 12 January 2007
Interviewee: Chris Morrison, Continuing Education Support Specialist

Organization: Massachusetts Institute of Technology
URL: http://ocw.mit.edu/index.html
Date: 28 February 2007
Interviewee: Mark Brown, Senior Manager, Stellar CMS

Organization: Harvard Medical School
URL: http://cmeonline.med.harvard.edu/
Date: 27 March 2007
Interviewee: Andrea Long, Manager of Distance Learning and CME Online

Organization: International Rescue Committee
URL: http://www.theirc.org

Date:	29 March 2007 (phone conversation)
Interviewee:	Eric Le Guen, Security Coordinator

Organization:	United States Institute of Peace
URL:	http://www.usip.org/training/online/analysis.html
Date:	10 April 2007
Interviewees:	Pamela Aall, Vice President for Domestic Programs
	Keith Bowen, Senior Program Officer
	Michael Lekson, Vice President for Professional Training

Organization:	United Nations Department of Safety and Security
URL:	https://dss.un.org
Date:	Meeting on 9 April 2007
Interviewees:	Gerald Ganz, Chief, Training and Development Section
	Cathy Gilbert, Training and Development Section
	Michael Phelps, Training and Development Section

Organization:	United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
URL:	http://www.unicef.org/pathtraining
Date:	Meeting on 9 April 2007
Interviewee:	Waithira Gikonyo, Senior Learning Officer

Organization:	American Red Cross
URL:	http://www.redcross.org
Date:	Meeting on 10 April 2007
Interviewee:	Beth Crean, Manager, International Humanitarian Law Dissemination and Chapter Support

Organization:	InterAction
URL:	http://www.interaction.org
Date:	Meeting on 10 April 2007
Interviewee:	John Schafer, Security Coordinator

Organization:	Peace Operations Training Institute (William & Mary College)
URL:	http://www.unitarpoci.org
Date:	Video conference on 12 April 2007
Interviewee:	Dr Harvey Langholtz
	Professor, Department of Psychology, William & Mary College
	Senior Special Fellow, UN Institute for Training and Research

Appendix 2.   Organizations represented by pilot online course participants

United Nations

- Department of Safety and Security
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
- United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
- United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA)
- United Nations Office for the High Commissioner of Human Rights (UNOHCHR)
- World Food Programme (WFP)
- UNRWA – West Bank Field Office

Government agencies

- Directorate-General for Humanitarian Aid – ECHO

- Canadian Representative Office to the Palestinian Authority
- European Commission Technical Assistance Office

Non-governmental organizations

- American Red Cross
- Center for Safety and Development
- International Committee of the Red Cross
- Islamic Relief
- Mercy Corps
- Youth Social Work Association

Universities

- Indiana University Law School, USA
- Newcastle Law Academy, Dhaka, Bangladesh
- University Federico II, Naples, Italy

Appendix 3.   Organizations represented by face-to-face participants

United Nations

- Department of Safety and Security
- Office of Legal Affairs
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
- United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA)
- United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)
- Humanitarian & Programme Support Office, UN Assistance Mission for Iraq
- United Nations Mission in the DRC

Government agencies

- Canadian Forces, Office of the Judge Advocate General
- Consulate General of Sweden in Jerusalem (Sida)
- Federal Ministry of Justice, Government of Nigeria
- Ministry of the Attorney General – Legal Services Branch, Canada
- Ministry of Defense, Norway
- War Crimes Section, Government of Canada, CBSA
- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)
- Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs

Non-governmental organizations

- Al-Haq, Ramallah, West Bank of the Occupied Palestinian Territory
- Human Rights Watch
- International Secretariat of Amnesty International
- Norwegian Center for Human Rights
- OXFAM

Universities

- Nalsar University of Law, Hyderabad, India
- US Navy War College