

IAIA's Experience with Distance Learning Tools

- (1) Introduction of IAIA
- (2) IAIA '00 - Distance Learning First Hand
- (3) IAIA WB SEA-China Project
- (4) IAIA Website
- (5) Web-cams
- (6) Value of Distance Learning

IAIA is a nonprofit capacity-building organization for environmental practitioners and decision-makers. You might have noted the reference to the IAIA Marrakech Declaration on Capacity Building in Barry Sadler's briefing for this session, but for 25 years, IAIA has been promoting the use of and improvement of impact assessment as a tool for decision making.

As an organization for professionals, IAIA has the usual quarterly peer-reviewed journal, publishes a quarterly newsletter and other special publications, has an ever-growing website, listservs, interest-area sections, etc. However, IAIA is probably best known for its annual conferences, dubbed rather un-creatively IAIA '01, '02, '03 ...

Each year, the conference is in a different part of the world. If you have never had the opportunity to attend one of our conferences, I highly recommend the experience, and I invite you to IAIA '05 to be held in Boston in May 2005. The theme of IAIA '05 is Ethics and Quality in Impact Assessment. IAIA is also having a special meeting in 2005; this one will be in Prague in September 2005 and is totally devoted to Strategic Environmental Assessment. At our annual conferences, we generally gather 500-600 practitioners, government and donor agency delegates, and private consultants from 60 or more nations. IAIA '04 topped out at 875 delegates from nearly 80 nations. There are pre-meeting technical visits, training courses, special events, plus 3.5 conference days packed with forums, concurrent sessions, and most of all opportunities to network with people around the globe.

Distance Learning First Hand

IAIA '00 holds a special place in my heart. It was mid-way through this conference that I received a phone call at 11:00 pm telling me that the IAIA HQ office in Fargo, ND had been flooded to the ceiling. I was told, "Most everything is destroyed." Having no experience with floods - apparently giving no thought to all the TV news and weather channel footage of destructive floods around the world, I imagined the offices slowing filling with something like nice clean bathwater. I figured once the water receded and things had a chance to dry out, everything would be ok - well maybe a few water marks and wrinkles. Once I got back to Fargo, I shocked to find mud, grass and all sorts of unmentionable urban debris floating amidst the office furniture twisted and smashed by the force of the water.

I realize this doesn't make me look too brilliant, but I tell you this because I'm fairly sure it is a perfect illustration of the problems with distance learning:

- In most cases, the lessons are delivered in a sterile environment

- Most often, it is not what the recipient wants to hear or thinks he needs
- Most often, the recipients do not have the experiential context in which to frame the information they are given
- It is woefully inadequate to meet the demands of reality

On the other hand, would it have been better if I had not received that phone call? Well, I might have spent another 4 or 5 days in ignorant bliss. But even with my inadequate appreciation of the impacts I would face, I was still able to spring into action, arrange for a temporary office, computer connections, etc., even before I inspected the site. We had the new office up and running one day after our return to Fargo. So, let's say a very positive aspect of distance learning is to give the recipient a jump start for doing the tasks that need to be done.

IAIA-WB SEA Video Project

Now, a more intentional distance learning experience: Last Spring at IAIA '03 (Morocco), IAIA was approached by Jian Xie from the World Bank, asking if IAIA could assist the Bank in preparing a series of videos on SEA to be used in China. With the cooperation of IAIA's Section on SEA, under the leadership of Elvis Au and Maria Partidario, IAIA contributed about a dozen 20-minute videos from IAIA SEA experts from as many countries. These were intermingled with video clips from an equal number of World Bank and China's State EPA officials. All, of course, were translated to Mandarin.

Here is the broad outline of topics covered:

Module 1: The Basics of SEA

- 1.1 What is SEA (terminology)
- 1.2 Why we need SEA
- 1.3 History, trends and drivers of SEA
- 1.4 Characteristics of SEA - Comparison w/EIA
- 1.4 SEA at the policy, plan and program levels
- 1.5 Legal basis of SEA development
- 1.6 Making SEA more relevant to poverty reduction policies, plans and programs

Module 2: How to Do SEA

- 2.1 Addressing the right issues: overview of policies, programs and plans with significant environmental consequences
- 2.2 Institutional aspects of SEA preparation and review
- 2.3 Integrating SEA into planning and decision making
- 2.4 Public participation and consultation
- 2.5 Procedures and commonly used methods for SEA: applications in the real world

Module 3: International Experiences and Case Studies

- 3.1 Case studies at the policy level
- 3.2 Case studies at the program & plan levels
- 3.3 Sector-specific SEA applications (transport, water & sanitation, energy, forestry, trade)
- 3.4 Country-specific experiences

3.5 Experiences of international development institutions

The tapes are shown at the training courses with two or three "live" instructors to supplement and answer questions. The instructors are present only for the duration of the course, but the tapes and reference materials are left behind for further viewing. The contact information for all instructors is made available in the reference material, so all of the IAIA/WB video stars can be contacted electronically at any time.

The background to this is that China enacted new EIA legislation in September 2003, and with that, suddenly 30,000 Chinese had to be trained within a very short time. 30,000 is only the beginning. Most likely, this makes whatever training needs you might have in your countries pale by comparison.

To date, only one course has been offered. Several more are scheduled throughout the summer, so I can't tell you what the Chinese think of all this or how well it is working. I can give you some idea of the impact of the demand for the course: The first training course of this series was announced on the SEPA website one afternoon and by the next morning, they had to pull the announcement. The course enrollment was maxed.

This distance learning video course idea certainly will not meet the demand for and extent of training needs in China, but it certainly is a means to jump start the learning process.

IAIA Website Training Component (www.iaia.org)

Another way IAIA is contributing to the wonderful world of distance learning is through our website. With a little help from our friend, Hussein Abaza, at UNEP, IAIA was able to initiate a special training component of the organization's website. Resident now on this component of the website is the UNEP training manual, several seminal reports on EA effectiveness, the two-day SEA training curriculum used by Maria Partidario at many of the IAIA pre-conference training sessions. The site has a discussion forum and there are plans to develop a training course database, but for the database, we will need more resources and a little more time.

Web Conferencing

Another tool that I think has great potential for distance learning is the web conference. Two weeks ago, I bought a \$30 web camera and set it up on my computer. With this and the appropriate web conferencing program, I am able to talk to anyone else who has a camera; we can see each other, share a document, send a PowerPoint slide presentation - all amazingly close to real time. We're just now learning the potential of this tool, but I think it may be tremendous for meetings, seminars, sharing of information, consultations, mentoring, and someday perhaps, the next meeting of the Parties.

Evaluation of Distance Learning Experience

These distance learning tools and experiences all share the downsides of distance learning -- limited value and effectiveness - and we run the risk of selling distance learning as the quick fix tool for an enormous problem. It probably goes without saying that no form of distance learning will ever be

able to replace 6 years of advanced study followed by an internship/mentoring program. Yet what capacity building effort can? And what organization among us has the resources to do all that needs to be done?

I will close by recounting comments made at a capacity building workshop I snuck in and out of for a few minutes at IAIA '04 -- the Vancouver meeting. The usual discussions ensued about the woefully inadequate job we were all doing in capacity development.

Then a lady stood to speak. She was from the Canadian NWT - the area really defines the term "remote". She said she was responsible for assessment in her region. She had no formal training beyond high school to do her job. About one year ago, she had the opportunity to attend a two-day seminar on EIA. She had come to the Vancouver meeting, attended a two-day SIA training course and the concurrent sessions associated with the conference. That's it. That's all the training she has had. She said that might not sound like much, but to her it was capacity development. She said she had learned so very much that she could immediately apply to her job; she was walking on air.

Her message to us all and mine to you is that ANY capacity development including the use of distance learning tools is more valuable than we could imagine to those who have no alternative.

Our challenge, then, is to make distance-learning experiences as informative, comprehensive, applicable, adaptable to the user's situation (e.g., the UNEP EIA Training Manual), and available as possible.

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