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Editorial

The maiden issue of the DEASA-SADC CDE International Journal of Open and Distance Learning (IJODL) came out nearly four years ago, in September 2007. As a platform for scholarly engagement for regional and international open and distance education scholars and practitioners, the IJODL is interested in strong research-based articles of high quality. The current editorial policy requires the IJODL to undertake continuous self-evaluation to ensure that it publishes papers of the highest quality.

The current issue contains articles that range from acquisition of second language through content teaching in ODL environments to learner stress in ODL. The diversity of articles in this issue makes interesting and enjoyable reading. I hope the reader will learn from the findings, insights, and recommendations of these research articles.

Overview of this Issue’s Articles

The first article by Stanslaus T. Modesto explores opportunities offered by distance learning in the development of English as a second language (ESL) and suggests that systematically contrived interactions in ODL should lead to learning of new language registers. The study advocates that ODL tutors should be trained on how to integrate content teaching as a way of promoting second language acquisition.

The second article by Karen Ferreira-Meyers and Jane Nkosi explores how Moodle learning management system incorporates enquiry-based approach to enhance literacy skills of distance learners. The success of this initiative in fostering self-reliance and autonomy among learners influenced the need to roll-out Moodle learning management system and enquiry-based strategy on a university-wide level.

The third article from the Lesotho College of Education evaluates the effectiveness of self-instructional distance learning materials in relation to motivating learners to prepare for and participate fully in tutorials. Angelina Khorò’s findings have implications for practice that go beyond the Lesotho College of Education.

The context for the next article on decentralised examination marking system is the Zimbabwe Open University. This study examines the extent to which quality assurance is observed in decentralised examinations marking and addresses challenges of credibility and confidentiality faced by examinations marked under decentralised settings.

Oduetse Otukile presents open schooling perspective when he investigates the challenges and distance learning experiences of secondary school students. Otukile concludes that most school equivalency learners who move from conventional classroom teaching to distance learning find it difficult to adjust into the open and distance learning (ODL) mode.
Godson Gatsha’s study explores the nature of stress experienced by distance learners in five Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) countries and the effectiveness of stress-coping mechanisms and concludes that a wide range of support mechanisms is required to help learners cope with stress and improve completion rates.

Finally, a study by T. Joyejob and S. Nundoo-Ghoorah determined the profile of a typical learner at the Mauritius College of the Air (MCA). Although the results show that a typical MCA learner faces several challenges, distance education has opened access to those previously excluded due to socio-economic status, gender, age and entry qualifications.

T.J. Nhundu PhD
Editor-in-Chief
Acquiring a Second Language through the Study of Content Subjects in Distance Education

Stanslaus Tichapondwa Modesto
Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning
stmodesto2006@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper describes the role of tutor-student interactions in the development of English as a second language (ESL), focusing on the more formal academic registers of a business studies course, offered to adults doing a distance education (DE) diploma. The aim of the study is to investigate the extent to which distance education learners also learn English while studying content subjects, as well as establishing how DE tutors can be trained to integrate content teaching and promotion of second language acquisition. After initial training of tutors, interactions of a group of DE learners under a tutor were audio-taped, transcribed, and analysed. One of the findings was that systematically contrived interactions lead to learning of new registers, a fact confirmed in the context-reduced use of new registers by students when it came to the writing of assignments based on specific content. One of the recommendations made was that conscious exposure of DE tutors to didactic issues is facilitative of language acquisition during face-to-face tutorials.

Key Words: interaction, registers, face-to-face tutorials, negotiation of content, context-embedded, de-contextualised.

Introduction

According to Malamah-Thomas (1987), learning subject content as the main purpose for any given learning event forms the basis for interaction. However, the link between negotiation of content and language learning is often not appreciated. In this paper, it is argued that for students who are learning content subjects through the medium of a second language, English is both a target and the medium of education. In DE circumstances where limited resources are put into communication issues, many adult learners are not only learning the dominant language as a new language, but are expected to demonstrate its competent use when they respond to tasks and assignments. In such circumstances, the construction of new curriculum knowledge must go hand-in-hand with the development of the second language, the language registers for a given course (see www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Prague07_LAC_Primary_EN.doc)
This paper illustrates how such integration can be achieved. Through an analysis of the nature and context of the interaction of a class of DE adult learners and their tutor, it argues that students’ current understandings of a curriculum topic, and their use of familiar everyday language to express these understandings should be seen as the basis for the development of the unfamiliar registers of different course content; and that tutor-student interactions arising out of such understandings serve as a shared contextual basis from which these new meanings can be jointly constructed (cf. Mercer, 2000). Theorising from the analysis, the article also argues that a language model, which is text-based and contextually grounded is an important theoretical underpinning for learning a language or Second Language Acquisition (SLA) through interactions based on subject content (Tichapondwa, 2006; 2008).

According to Ellis’ (1985; 1994) summaries of major researches, much of the SLA research has focused on language form and the learning of grammatical sub-systems. From such research we have gained insights into learners’ acquisition of morphology and syntax. However, these studies say little about the acquisition of pedagogic discourse, and so do not provide the linguistic insights necessary for the development of subject discourses. Yet it is this academic register which students, especially ESL learners must learn to control. Ortega (1999) and Harley et al. (1990) suggest that language proficiency of students is related to the control of sociolinguistically appropriate registers, particularly in more context reduced situations.

One response by tutors of DE students, to a situation where learners are learning in their less well-developed language (English), is for the tutor to consciously simplify or modify the language of tutorials by attempting to avoid all lexical or grammatical complexity which is beyond what he/she believes to be the learners’ current understanding. While the approach may help to make language comprehensible to learners, it fails to take into account how students will obtain new linguistic data. It can actually lead to “what is effectively a simplified, reductionist, and alternative curriculum, which may create lower academic expectations” (Gibbons, 1998:101). In other words, simplified input, as White (1987) argues, may work against second language learning since learners are denied full access to subject specific registers, which happen to be the language of learning.

The background

The tutorial group from which the data discussed in this paper derive, is one of the four groups pursuing the Diploma in Business Management with a DE college in the city of Gaborone (Botswana). It is made up of 23 students whose first language is Setswana. They do four courses per semester, and in the semester in which the study was conducted, the four courses on offer were Business Statistics, Business Finance, Research Methods, and Occupational Health and Safety. Learners study through distance, and meet three times during the semester for face-to-face tutorials to discuss
each of the courses. Each meeting/tutorial is of two-hour duration per course, and is the only occasion when interaction is supposed to take place.

All the twenty-three students who participated in this study are adults whose ages range from 22 to 52 years. They are all employed in and around Gaborone, and already hold some qualifications. They have some background in English, being holders of the school leaving certificate known as ‘ordinary level’ certificate, which presumably enables them to cope with the linguistic demands of their studies. Observation has shown that they are adept at using English in face-to-face context-embedded communication where meanings are reliant on the surrounding physical and visual situation. However, these students occasionally experience difficulty in understanding and using the more context-reduced registers of the topic they will be studying during the tutorial, especially as the demand for written literacy increases. Thus, the focus of this paper is on the learning of an academic register by students who are largely fluent in English in basic communication contexts. The terms decontextualised and context-reduced, as used in this paper, have the specific linguistic meaning indicated in the four texts cited later, and refer to the way in which language changes as it is distanced in time and space from the original and immediate context in which it is located.

**The language model used**

If the teaching of new registers is to occur concurrently with the teaching of subject content, through the medium of ESL, then programme planning should be informed by a model of language which relates language to meaning as well as to the context in which it is used. This study draws on systemic functional grammar (Halliday, 1994) and related descriptions of register theory (Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Fotos, 1998). Register theory as proposed by Halliday and Hasan (faculty.ksu.edu.sa/kamri/Pages/Text-linguistics.aspx) describes the grammar of a written or spoken text in terms of the linguistic realizations of the variables of the context: How the text realizes the Field (i.e. what the text is all about); Tenor (the relationship between speaker-listener or reader-writer; and Mode (the channel of the text, whether it is written or spoken). Each of these variables requires the speaker or writer to draw on specific resources within the lexico-grammar (the grammar and vocabulary).

The construct of mode and the notion of a mode continuum (Martin, 1984) was a major organizing principle of the tutoring programme described presently, because it offers a linguistic framework against which teaching activities can be sequenced from most context-dependent (and thus for ESL students the most easily understood), to least context-dependent. The following four texts derived from interactions of students studying occupational health and safety course, illustrate this mode continuum, and show how certain linguistic features change, in predictable ways, as language becomes increasingly context-reduced and closer to the written forms. These texts are included at this stage merely to illustrate how the model functions. The topics deal with the topic **Sound** at the workplace.
Text 1 (spoken by four students and accompanying action)

This... no it means something...it means a different thing...this one

What is that..?

Yes... it does. What is frequency?

It is number...number of doing something.

Yes...something like that.

Text 2 (spoken by one student about the activity after the event)

We tried definition... definition of words on sound speed of sound...speed and wave-length. The group didn’t... wasn’t able to define wave-length. It’s difficult...

Text 3 (written by the same student)

Our task was to define words on the physics of sound. We managed to define speed of sound. It is different from the wave-length. We still need to define the word wave-length.

Text 4 (taken from a learner’s written assignment)

A single compression, which is transferred in the medium is known as the wave, and the distance between two consecutive wave fronts represents the wave-length. The speed of sound is a function of the density and elasticity of the medium and is highly dependent on temperature.

Text 1 is typical of the context-embedded language produced in face-to-face contexts. It is characterized by the use of exophoric reference (this, that), and is probably accompanied by gestures to name the referent thus compensating for appropriate register the learner may not have. As a result, there is a low lexical density. In Text 2, the changes in language are the result of a change in context. The original experience is now distanced in both time (the text occurred later) and space (the student no longer has group members to share ideas in front of her). The speaker reconstructs the experience through language, and so makes explicit the participants (realized through nouns and pronouns: we, group, sound, speed) and actions (realized through verbs: tried, define). Text 3, a written text, is further distanced from the original event, since the audience is now unseen. Typically, the written text cannot depend on shared assumptions, and the writer must recreate experience through language alone. Here, for example, an orientation is needed to provide the context of what follows: Our task was to... In Text 4, the major participants (words related to sound) are generically defined. There is an increase in lexical density as knowledge is presented dispassionately. This represents the ultimate destination for mastered registers, presented in written form (transition from context-embedded to context-reduced communication).
In pedagogic circumstances, students are required to make shifts within an increasing number of fields, and to move from personal everyday ways of making meanings towards the socially shared discourses of specific disciplines. Clearly, therefore, a second language learner is likely to have fewer difficulties with producing something like Text 1, where the context itself provides a support for meaning, and where he/she does not need great linguistic resources compared with the more context-reduced texts, where there is a greater demand placed on the learner’s lexico-grammatical resources. In the tutorials, an oral reporting stage (like Text 2) is surprisingly, often not given much attention. It is on the basis of this argument that adults can be consciously made to learn new registers through systematic transition from contextualized to decontextualised presentation of face-to-face tutorials. This is based on a social view of learning, as elucidated below.

A social view of learning

According to Probyn (2005), to master knowledge is a matter of mastering how to interact. It is with this view in mind that the Bullock Report (1975:141) regards interaction as “verbal encounter through which the teacher draws information from the students, elaborates and generalizes it, and produces a synthesis” through the mediating influence of language. This social view of learning is best articulated in the constructivist theory, which postulates that particular sorts of classroom discourse carry knowledge. The theory recognizes the role of language as a means of constructing knowledge and understanding (Mercer, 1995:4; search.barnesandnoble.com/...Talk.../ Neil-Mercer/e/9781847873798). According to this theory, knowledge is socially constructed, meaning that the study of learning as an individual process involves talk as a joint activity. Mercer (2004:139) has made the following observation regarding how thinking is based on ways with subject specific registers:

A sociocultural perspective highlights the possibility that educational success and failure may be explained by the quality of dialogue, rather than simply in terms of the capability of individual students or the skill of teachers.

Interaction practices during face-to-face tutorials are, therefore, considered from the point of view of active and purposeful language engagement, theorized as a requisite to interaction and learning. In the interpretation of Vygotsky’s (1978) theory, neo-Vygotskians such as Mercer and Sams (2006:508) have claimed that social involvement in problem solving and learning of content is a crucial factor.

The importance of allowing space for talk within the curriculum has long been recognized (e.g. Barnes et al., 1969; Bruner 1978). Bruner (1986), following ideas expressed by Vygotsky (1978) about the zone of proximal development, in which the learner is assisted to learn new knowledge beyond his/her present understanding,
through the support of the teacher, refers to this type of support as ‘scaffolding’. This is cognitive support that the teacher provides through dialogue so that the learner can easily make sense of language that appears difficult. This vicarious consciousness by the tutor, in the DE context, demonstrates how language serves as a means for transforming experience into cultural knowledge of English, the dominant language.

There are several implications that can be derived from this theory regarding the present study. As Swain (1995) suggests, it is important for second language learners to have opportunities to modify what they say, in order to produce more comprehensible, coherent, and syntactically improved discourse for their audience. This attention to output stretches the learner in that he/she is pushed to attend to syntactic as well as semantic processing. The lecture room implication for this, it is suggested, is not that language form per se should become a major focus for the tutor, but that it is important for learners to have opportunities to use stretches of discourse in contexts where there is a press on their linguistic resources, and where they must focus not only on what they wish to say but on how they are saying it. A further implication is that there must be a focus on extended opportunities for learner talk, and in terms of planning for tutorials, the facilitator should afford what one would call ‘more air time’ for students. This can happen in what Lemke (1990) calls the triadic dialogue, defined in conventional terms as the initiation-response-feedback (IRF) moves (cf. Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975). In that interaction pattern the teacher initiates dialogue; the learner responds; and the teacher gives some feedback, in which case for about two thirds of the time the teacher is talking. Thus, a programme, supportive of the learning of registers was designed to create opportunities for alternative interactional patterns to occur even within the IRF pattern, which is considered to be constraining.

**Methodology**

In the tutorial, which is the focus of the study, teaching and learning activities based on the Occupational Health and Safety content: *Importance of adequate ventilation at the workplace*, were planned to reflect points along the mode continuum described earlier. The assumption was that this would offer a logical progression in terms of language learning.

All the four tutors were given training on the potential of principled classroom interaction. This happened over four sessions, each of two-hour duration. The training covered the basics of interaction, and included: the definition of interaction; explanation of the importance of content as the basis for interaction; the significance of subject specific registers; learning of subject registers as an instance of second language acquisition; ways of encouraging active learner contribution using the target registers; the importance of using language in groups; reporting group experiences after the group work event; and creating opportunities to speak or write autonomously when responding to tasks related to the topic.
This was some kind of treatment (X), after which tutors were observed (O) in the course of interaction. This design is referred to as the “one-shot Case Study” (cf. Tuckman, 1972:104), and is diagrammed as:

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X     O
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Although all the four tutors were exposed to the treatment, and later observed in action, only one group’s interaction in four sequential linguistic events was recorded as data for analysis and interpretation. The choice of one group was random since all four were considered to be at par. Numbers 1 to 4 were put in a hat, and any one picked would be representative. The experiment lasted five months, that is, one semester.

At the beginning of the topic, the tutor invited students to tell what they already knew about the subject. Students then moved on to participate in small group learning experiences, where the language used was clearly context-embedded. At this stage students were told to exchange views on the importance of ventilation at the workplace, and come up with, at least, six points. They were left free to decide as a group how to do this. They were also aware of the expectation that they would describe their own views to the whole group and provide explanations.

Group interaction was followed by a tutor-guided reporting session, where each group member described what had been done and offered explanations. The tutor interacted with individuals, clarifying, probing, and recasting the content. The shift towards decontextualised language would be noted. Before the reporting began, there was a short tutor-led discussion focusing on the specific lexis, which the learners were expected to learn. The aim of the tutor-guided reporting stage was to extend the students’ linguistic resources in a less context-embedded situation and focus on the specific discourse of Occupational Health and Safety. It was anticipated that the reporting stage would create a context for students to rehearse language structures and registers, which were closer to written discourse.

After students had taken part in the tutor-guided reporting, which included listening to what others had said, they wrote a response to the question: What have you learned about the importance of ventilation at the workplace? This writing was intended as a personal record of each learner’s learning. The interest of the written work in the study is that it provides some evidence of second language uptake (specifically the registers) in that it reflects wordings, which occurred in the process of jointly negotiated learner-tutor interactions.
The Findings

The texts included in this paper are representative in terms of linguistic features discussed above. The exchange is examined using the systemic functional model of language (alluded to earlier), to indicate the linguistic realizations of each stage, and the interconnection between stages. Texts from each stage are also analysed in relation to the learners with more focus on Mpho, identified as S2 within the group. The rationale for tracking a particular student through the stages is meant to illustrate how language development can evolve out of interactions and through jointly constructed discourse, thus offering insight into the *how* of language learning. The words in bold are those to be given attention regarding primary focus of the study.

Text A (Tutor-led discussion)

T: *What do you understand by ventilation?*

S2: *Free movement of air.*

T: *(more hands are raised to bid for answers) I notice more hands.*

S4: *Movement of air.*

T: *I want you to share the answers in your group, and answer the question: What is the importance of adequate ventilation at the workplace? I will expect one person from the group to give a report of your findings. Try and give, at least, six points.*

Text B (from group work)

S2: *Imagine this is a workplace. A factory. Let’s try.*

S3: *You want it like that...? It is to remove bad air. (using gestures).*

S2: *too much bad air makes you not know what you are doing.*

S1: *Oh... I know that. Yes... if the amount of air... also has dust and other things like (trying to illustrate with hand gestures).*

S2: *Interesting...It’s like that for buildings in industry.*

S3: *Also to remove germs...those small germs (illustrating with hands).*

S4: *Let’s show that if there are too many of them...*

S3: *What about bad smell?... I mean...*

S1: *Yes... I understand that... and people can die from lack of fresh air.*

S4: *Yeah... this is a big problem in our factories.*

The dialogue continues for several minutes longer, and there has been no teacher input during the course of the conversation. **Text C (Teacher guided reporting)**
T: I listened to the interesting conversations from the groups, and you used some words relating to the topic. These can be replaced with special words that are normally used in the field of Occupational Health and Safety. Let’s look at some of the words you used and see if we can replace them. I am going to write them on the board. (Tutor writes on the board and explains).

Movement of air: ventilation
bad air: carbon dioxide
not know what you are doing: unconscious
amount of: volume
bad smell: odour
dust and other things: contaminants
small germs: bacteria
die from lack of fresh air: suffocate

Now, Mpho try to tell them what you learned.

S2: Em.. I learned that movement of air at workplace is called ventilation. If there is too much bad air...um carbon dioxide (laughter from colleagues) too much volume of bad air.

T: Yes you are doing fine. Please go on to show other aspects of ventilation.

S2: High volume of carbon dioxide can make you unconscious. I mean you will not know what you are doing. This is when there are contaminants...they are like dust and bad smell...bad smell...yes odour. You can also suffer... no suffocate I mean because there is too much bacteria.

The tutor invites other contributions before requesting for written follow up.

Text D (written response from Mpho)

From this topic I learnt that ventilation is important at the workplace. A high volume of carbon dioxide is not good and can cause somebody to suffocate. This is true when the air is contaminated with dust and other odours. These can carry germs in the form of bacteria, which makes it difficult to breathe. This means knowledge about ventilation is an important part of occupational health.

Data analysis

Text A, the tutor’s linguistic intervention, accomplished two significant points, namely, clarifying the task to be done in groups; and specifying the expectation that group reports were expected.
Text B, the group activity, has led to the use of here and now language, with visual support, presence of colleagues, and gestures available to provide support where the speaker does not have adequate lexis to put across a message. The activity allowed students to explore and develop together certain understandings about ventilation, using familiar everyday language. This understanding occurred before students were expected to understand and use educated discourse associated with Occupational Health and Safety. A number of exophoric references (this is, like that) together with gestures are used, making what is communicated very clear to the listener. The text is also composed of action rather than dense information exchanges. There are also personal comments indicating affect (Oh I know that, interesting...). Thus, the text is about social interaction as much as it is about ventilation.

Text C, the guided reporting, begins with tutor input, meant to draw learner attention to registers. The tutor works with the students to make sense of the activities in which they have been engaged, by helping them reconstruct their experiences and develop shared understandings through language. Wegerif and Mercer (1996:53) suggest that it is through being encouraged and enabled “to clearly describe events, to account for outcomes, and consolidate what they have learned in words” that learners are helped to understand and gain access to educated discourse.

The tutor re-directs attention to registers, and writes them on the board for reference during the discussion. S2 who is singled out to respond incorporates the new vocabulary into her discourse with occasional lapses into social discourse used during group work. However, she has reached a level of awareness that she self corrects and responds in extended discourse. From the point of view of second language learning, it is important to note that interactions with the tutor occurred at a time when students had already developed an understanding of the topic forming the basis for interaction. Thus the tutor’s language would be comprehensible because of the schematic knowledge already possessed by learners. It then follows that a tutor in this context is able to use structures and lexis beyond what might be understood if learners had not taken part in small group experiences first, and were without these as a basis for dialogue. However, the language demands on learners in this more decontextualised situation were, at times, evident (bad smell...bad smell...yes odour. You can also suffer... no suffocate).

The tutor’s role in these episodes is demonstrably crucial. The texts show how the interactions with individual students provided a scaffold for their attempts, allowing for communication to proceed while giving the learner access to new linguistic data. The micro interactions between teacher and students are different in several small but important respects from the IRF pattern associated with more traditional classrooms, nevertheless these differences appear to have significant effects on the interaction as a whole. To borrow Cazden’s (1988:530) viewpoint “even small changes to the more usual patterns of teacher-student interaction can have considerable cognitive or
social significance”. There is a departure from the IRF pattern where the tutor would ask questions with answers in mind. Instead, in the present study, the tutor begins the exchange by inviting students to relate what they have learned, rather than with a question to which learner response is predictable (a display question).

The student takes the role of what I call a ‘primary knower’. Although it is the tutor who is in control of the content associated with the overall thematic development of the unit of work, the individual exchanges locate that control in the student, thereby reversing typical teacher-learner roles. The effect is to modify relations of power by shifting the location of knowledge, at least temporarily, onto the student, thereby modifying knowledge asymmetries. Thus we have:

Initiation: An invitation by the teacher for the student to take the floor.

Response: The student initiates meaning by giving what she has learnt.

Feedback: Tutor encourages student’s extended discourse in new discourse (Please go on to show other aspects of ventilation).

Since this sequence is in some significant ways unlike a more typical IRF sequence, and because it was a pattern identified as occurring regularly within tutor-guided learning events among the four tutorial groups, it can be referred to as student initiates, and tutor recasts. Significantly, the tutor leads from behind, and while following the learner’s lead and accepting as a valid contribution the information given by the learner, the tutor provides, at the same time, alternative linguistic forms to ground the learner’s meaning in more context-appropriate ways.

Encouraged to go on by the tutor, Mpho’s response confirms how this sort of interaction has potential for the simultaneous learning of both curriculum content and language. We can also conclude that guided reporting encourages learner language to be pushed. Mpho is going beyond what is unproblematic for her, and because she is allowed a second attempt, she also has the opportunity to produce more comprehensible output.

Text D, the written text, offers some evidence of uptake. Many of the students included register, which they had used in the tutor-guided reporting session, or which had been part of the tutor’s recasting. The text from Mpho (S2) is representative and was written without any further assistance. There is lexical density in it, which shows that learners can be guided to use the acquired registers, the second language, when tutors approach the matter systematically after receiving training on the potential of using applied linguistic ideas in pedagogic circumstances. These circumstances that are context-reduced are the ones learners have to handle when they write assignments or explain to workmates in the absence of textbooks. When they are able to use language this autonomously, we then say they can self-regulate (cf. Vygotsky’s, 1978 Zone of proximal Development).
Students’ perceptions about their learning were also part of data analysis in the study. They offered valuable insights about the process of learning they had gone through at the face-to-face tutorials. For example, following the writing, students were asked to talk about what had helped them to write. Almost all responses referred to the fact that the talking they had taken part in, including the small group work, had played an important part in helping them to write, while several learners also referred to the role listening to others had played:

Talking in the group helped me see how others think.
I listened carefully to my colleagues to improve the way I say things.
During discussion new words were introduced, which I did not know.
I can now speak fluently about ventilation as a result of listening and talking to others.

However, not all learners were appreciative of this approach, especially the use of group work as a teaching method. Some students thought it was boring for adults.

Limitations

Notwithstanding the encouraging results, there is a sense in which the study is limited, notably regarding its data, which are confined to a small population. This poses problems relative to the issue of validity. Also, the one-shot Case Study design precludes the important aspect of control for either maturation or history. These two are important variables when it comes to linguistic behaviour modification. However, in mitigation is the fact that though limited, the data represent naturalistic learning events typical of any pedagogic situation. Also, in view of the fact that the experimental procedure was repeated several times during the five-month-long semester, with all the groups under four different tutors, this kind of intensity serves to authenticate the results. The limitation about the size of the population derives partly from a positive fact, namely, that the study was conducted with distance education learners. There are not many such groups to work with, so, it was just as well that even a small population, when investigated, yields results that can be taken up for further investigation in more extensive studies.

Discussion

Taking into account the mitigating factors raised about the limitations, the study makes a vital contribution to the theme of second language learning in English second language situations where the primary objective would be the negotiation of content.

At theoretical level, the study has contributed by applying Halliday and Hasan’s (1985) model to DE interaction circumstances in an objective manner. This focused on
subject specialist registers from a discourse analytical perspective. From a descriptive point of view, the study also made a valid contribution, namely, the description of a particular situation. In this instance, it is the detailed analysis of the lecture room discourse of certain groups of tutors and learners, accounting for the changes brought about in the discourse behaviour. In that regard, the study serves as a vindication of the need to change the discourse behaviour of conventionally trained teachers.

Tutor-guided interactions, in this context, offer a rich potential for second language development. Also of significance is the opportunity such episodes offer to students to use longer stretches of discourse, and hence to produce comprehensible output. In addition, in learner-initiated exchanges, the learner is hearing new language registers in the context of the immediate or personal meaning he or she is trying to make. The learner might, therefore, have a greater investment in the new language than is the case when language items have been pre-determined by the language focus of the tutor.

Of particular significance was the place of student-tutor interactions within the tutorials. Occurring as they did, after students have already developed some understanding of key concepts through the small group work, allowed the tutor to use new wordings and ways of meaning – new register- which was more readily interpretable by the students. The degree to which interactions are comprehensible for ESL students can, therefore, be related not only to the interactional features themselves, and to the immediate situational context in which they occur, but also to what has preceded them- in this case the development of individual schematic knowledge, which students gained through participation in the small group work, and which they then brought to the interaction.

The significance of the overall sequence of activities also lies in the challenge it presents to more traditional ways of sequencing teaching and learning activities in the second language classroom. Often the teaching of new language begins with some pre-teaching of vocabulary by the teacher, and students are then given a series of increasingly less focused and less teacher-directed activities in which to practise the language. Underlying this approach is the suggestion that learners must first learn language before they can use it. The approach used in the present study, on the other hand, takes into account the fact that children are doing more than learning new language items. They are also using it to construct new curriculum knowledge and to develop additional ways of thinking and talking about personal learning. The sequencing allowed for students to build on their existing language and understandings, and to link old learning with new.

The transition from context-embedded to decontextualised use of language is characterized by an important feature of interaction, best described as ‘intertextuality’. This refers to the intertextual relationships that exist in the dialogue, exemplified in
what the tutor says and what students are expected to read about the topic on ventilation; what students listen to and what they are expected to write; the familiar language of the home and the educated discourse of the topic. Thinking about how these links are made, intertextually, and recognizing where linguistic bridges are missing, has the potential of offering insights on how best to support learners acquire new registers of curriculum subjects.

Conclusion

In view of these insights from working with a distance education group, it can be concluded that conscious attention to registers, in the process of tutoring content, can yield positive findings applicable to situations where the person charged with leading a group of learners is in-charge. The support given, also referred to as scaffolding, has great potential for enhancing the learning of new vocabulary, new syntactic patterns, and mastery of curriculum issues. It is recommended that more extensive research, buttressed on language models and theories about interaction be carried out, especially in circumstances where English is both a second language and a medium of teaching. I believe this task requires researchers to take a more interdisciplinary approach for a wide range of learner profiles. I have in mind those distance education learners who are separated from peers and tutors by vast geographic distances, and have their only hope of interaction in the once-in-a-while face-to-face tutorial. This should be easier when building upon insights on the extent to which the negotiation of content can also lead to second language learning; and the roles teachers and students should play to realize that accomplishment.

References


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Academic literacy at the University of Swaziland: Incorporating the enquiry-based approach into Moodle as a possible response to literacy development

Karen Ferreira-Meyers & Jane Nkosi
University of Swaziland

Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to analyse tools and methods to enhance literacy skills of University of Swaziland learners, a majority of whom enter the University with limited skills. Literacy skills expected of these students include reading and writing skills, appropriate use of academic language, technical literacy, information literacy and knowledge of the cultural context.

In 2009 the Institute of Distance Education of the University of Swaziland started a pilot project which entailed the setting up and implementation of Moodle as the preferred Learning Management System (LMS). Several departments started offering part of their courses via online learning environment. In this paper the researchers focus on the resources and strategies proposed by the Department of Academic Communication Skills (English) and the Department of Modern Languages (French and Portuguese) to ensure that the learners’ literacy skills are developed through the courses they follow. Some of the Moodle features (Quickmail, customizable content areas for course information, document repository facility, discussion forum, Chat Room for real-time discussions, etc.) assist in providing a better way to implement enquiry-based learning strategies.

The main strategy investigated in this study is the enquiry-based approach to learning, which incorporates the following basic steps or components: ask questions, explore by observing and investigating, analyse and describe findings, communicate and share by writing and discussing and reflect on what has been learned. Research shows that this approach encourages learners to take part in research practice, which further promotes active engagement in learning and collaboration with other learners and lecturers. This approach is also noted for its contribution in fostering self-reliance and autonomy among learners. As learners become autonomous, they develop an identity and become aware of their strengths and weaknesses. The analysis and research done in the Moodle environment focusing on literacy skills developed by the enquiry-based approach allowed the researchers to recommend further implementation of both tools and strategy on a university-wide level.

1Presentations made in Dakar at E-learning in Africa international conference, with a follow-up at Efrard Conference 2009 (Paris) and Dakar (2010); see Ferreira-Meyers (2010a) and (2010b).
Introduction

As reported by Karen Ferreira-Meyers¹ in the 2009 E-Learning in Africa Conference, held in Dakar, Senegal, UNISWA introduced Moodle in 2008 as a preferred LMS through a concerted pilot project. Various departments now post resources on the system. This paper focuses on the resources and strategies proposed by the Department of Academic Communication Skills (English) and the Department of Modern Languages (French and Portuguese) to ensure that the learners’ literacy skills are developed through the courses they follow.

While excellent resource books, such as Jeff Stanford’s Moodle 1.9 for Second Language Teaching (2009), concentrate on the basic four language competencies (speaking, listening, reading and writing), the e-learning community at the University of Swaziland has been on the look-out for tools that help the learners enhance their literacy skills².

At the University of Swaziland in particular, learners should be able to display a variety of literacy skills to be functional in their studies. These include appropriate use of academic language, technical literacy, information literacy, knowledge of the cultural context, etc. Learners' knowledge should go beyond reading and writing skills, to include ability to locate information from various sources, synthesize and use the information across the curriculum. This requires a combination of all resources and skills on the part of the learners and lecturers.

The enquiry-based approach: definition and possible benefits

In education enquiry is about a greater understanding of the world in which the learner lives, learns, communicates, and works. Hence, an enquiry-based approach to learning generally incorporates the following basic steps or components:

1. Ask questions,
2. Explore by observing and investigating,
3. Analyse and describe findings,
4. Communicate and share by writing and discussing, and
5. Reflect on what has been learned.

¹Literacy is defined as the ability to read and write with a level of proficiency essential for communication. However, this definition confines literacy to written texts. Individuals need various types of literacy to be functional in today’s world. In educational settings academic literacy is a vital skill. Academic literacy involves a combination of relevant skills and knowledge for learners to be effective in their studies.
All of these processes also require learners to analyse two or more elements in terms of their similarities and differences on one or more characteristics. This type of analysis is a mental operation that is basic to human thought (Markman & Gentner, 1993; Medin, Goldstone, & Markman, 1995; Gentner & Markman, 1994). This approach also encourages learners to take part in research practice, which further promotes active engagement in learning and collaboration with other learners and lecturers. This approach is further noted for its contribution in fostering self-reliance and autonomy among learners. In turn, when learners become autonomous, they develop an identity and become aware of their strengths and weaknesses.

The role of the teacher in an enquiry-based approach is to be a facilitator, guide, and partner. Initially, the teacher poses open-ended questions and learners follow this lead and form their own. This type of activity motivates learners because their own questions ultimately become the focus of research and learning. As learners begin to research and explore, their learning becomes more web-like in structure, while the teacher assumes a different role. At this point, the teacher remains attentive to help learners remain focused. The teacher must be willing to allow time for discoveries, encourage dialogue among class members, and allow mistakes to be made. Errors lead learners to re-analyse their data and readjust their thinking. Our experience suggests that there are many benefits to using this teaching approach.

Foremost is that it teaches learners more than facts; it teaches them an important cognitive skill - to analyse literature for key elements of any topic they read. In addition to fostering the development of cognitive skills, the enquiry-based approach also helps learners by providing an organizing scheme for making sense of the mass of detail present in the reading. They also have a cognitive framework on which to hang new facts.

There are additional benefits for learners who use enquiry-based approach. For example, learners experience powerful motivation to remain abreast of the workload and appreciate the new self-enforced discipline. Since student verbalization is such a significant component of class time, learners who are exposed to enquiry-based learning are more likely to respond to open-ended whole-class enquiry. When learners form small groups and brainstorm on certain topics, it is not unusual for groups to offer interesting and creative ideas that may form a nice springboard for short discussions. Finally, the queries asked of learners provide moments of mental refreshment, which help enliven everyone in the classroom, including the teacher.

While at the University of Swaziland lecturers and tutors have used the enquiry-based approach mainly for smaller assignments, it is clear that enquiry-based learning is at the heart of any research activity, such as the end-of-study projects.
Enquiry-based learning approach has several important characteristics and associated advantages, including the following:

- **Versatility.** It is applicable across all content areas and is flexible and suitable for shared learning of team projects or for individual exploration.
- **Flexibility for learners.** It encourages learners to be more creative by giving them more freedom, time, and fewer constraints for discovery.
- **Highly motivating.** As learners become engaged in the question forming process, they take ownership of their learning.
- **Connected to the real world.** It works to prepare learners for real-life situations. It reinforces multiple skills and allows learners to build the confidence to know where and how to get wanted information.

As today's employers look for graduates with excellent generic skills, such as communication, interpersonal, learning, numeric, self-management and use of IT, as well as individuals who can work independently and who have high quality, transferable research skills, learners who have had an opportunity to learn with the enquiry-based approach should do better than those who have not.

**Learner autonomy and self-directed language learning**

Learner autonomy implies learners participating in the planning and reflecting on and evaluating the learning process. Self-directed learning learners are willing to assume responsibility for their own learning. With this ability learners monitor their learning and are able to assess their progress, test their ideas and evaluate how they are faring in any given task. Self-assessment is an integral part of self-directed learning and learner autonomy.

However, in order to achieve these goals learners need a framework within which to work. This framework includes suitable language learning tools that foster independent learning, learning new words, working with texts for both reading and listening comprehension, writing activities etc. E-learning tools, such as Moodle, provide such a framework that fosters development skills required for autonomous and self-directed learning within a learning community.

While it is clear that enquiry-based approach offers a myriad of advantages, there are challenges within UNISWA, within the e-learning set-up and within Moodle itself that need to be tackled before the university community can fully benefit from this teaching and learning strategy.
Challenges

UNISWA learners often come from public schools in Swaziland. These schools are often poorly resourced and have fewer libraries. Hence, learners have limited exposure to texts of different genres, online learning and interaction, technology and e-learning tools such as Moodle. A number of research projects have looked at the initial hurdles linked to the introduction of e-learning and Moodle. It has been outlined that one main challenge with innovations is affordability and acceptability by adopters, implementers and users (Ferreira-Meyers, 2010a; 2010b). Other challenges include:

• Some students and lecturers are not computer savvy and knowledgeable. Even though all UNISWA students go through a Computer Foundations Course during their first year of study, they may not have been exposed to learning management systems such as Moodle. Yet, Black et al. (2007) warn of the challenge of LMS adoption, namely the discomfort of the initial implementation.

• Lack of administrative/management support: it has been observed, on numerous occasions, that institutional support is a crucial factor for adoption of an LMS (Black et al. 2007: 36).

• Time constraints: Most IDE lecturers also teach fulltime at UNISWA and may not have the additional time to generate the interactive material for Moodle.

• Lack of technical support: Bersin is quoted by Black et al. (2007:38) alleging that "One of the biggest factors that affects overall satisfaction is not satisfaction with the product features themselves, but whether they are getting the right level of support: technical support, service, …"

• Lack of policy: Both IDE and UNISWA do not have open and distance learning policy with a strategy to integrate blended e-learning.

• Lack of calendar/roadmap: the establishment of a calendar would guide the adoption and implementation process greatly.

• Attitudinal problems: It seems that there is often a considerable degree of reluctance on the side of the teaching staff"to try to accommodate a more open and less directive teaching/learning approach" (Motschnig-Pitrik&Derntl 2008: 257).

• The gap between students' perception of technology and that of faculty continues to widen. According to the Horizon Report (2008), students and faculty continue to view and experience technology very differently. For example, students readily embrace social technologies like Facebook and similar platforms, while not necessarily accepting e-learning technologies. Such a gap has implications on the challenge that IDE will face with faculty and students when implementing e-learning.
Moodle features that allow UNISWA to set up enquiry-based learning strategies

The following are some of the in-built features within Moodle that UNISWA is currently putting to the test to verify whether they assist in providing a better way to implement enquiry-based learning strategies:

- Moodle has a “Quickmail”, an email function that makes it possible to email selected groups of learners or all learners from within Moodle.
- It has customizable content areas for course information such as course outlines, requirements, staff information, learners’ lists, announcements, Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).
- It has a document repository facility that provides an easy access to course materials such as lecture notes, hand-outs, past tests and examinations, modules, etc.
- Moodle provides access to a range of resources and materials which may not otherwise be available or accessible, for example graphics, sound (very useful for teaching foreign languages), animations and multimedia.
- It has efficient communication tools like email facility, discussion forum (asynchronous discussion tool and several options for group forum participation) and a Chat Room for real-time discussions.
- Moodle makes surveys of opinions prepared by instructors or administrators available.

Classroom examples: The UNISWA experience

1. Department of Academic Communication Skills

Experience gained by lecturers in the Department of Academic and Communication Skills (ACS) shows that high school learners have difficulty understanding academic texts, contrary to the popular assumption that they would have acquired sufficient knowledge to understand academic texts by the time they get to university. These learners perform poorly in tests that require higher orders skills such as analysis, synthesis and application. They also lack vocabulary decoding skills and the ability to infer meaning from context, which implies that they focus on the sentence level of the text and rarely use a deep surface approach to reading. In order to address this problem, IDE has employed the enquiry-based approach to reading and writing, especially in the Department of Academic Communication Skills (ACS). ACS uses the enquiry-based approach to learning with full-time and

3Barnard et al. (quoted by Black et al. 2007: 38) state that inadequate technical support and funding for support are primary reasons for failed adoption of e-learning technologies.
part-time learners. Learners in ACS are mainly young adults who have either just finished their high school or have had a couple of years of professional work.

The Academic Communication Skills (ACS) programme aims to develop academic literacy and research skills. In this section the researchers only focus on reading and writing, which are an integral part of developing academic literacy. Reading and writing online offers a wide range of reading and writing options. As a result, it encourages learners to use different genres and conventions and to be multi-skilled as readers and writers. Through this approach learners explore all the levels of Bloom’s taxonomy of cognitive skills, including critical thinking and evaluation. It is premised on the theory of constructivism, which encourages learners to be personally involved in knowledge construction and to collaborate with peers in this process. Learners develop text analysis skills, use a wider range of vocabulary, filter skills and develop skills to infer from context. They practice skimming and scanning, learn to paraphrase and summarise texts.

However, it should be noted that reading and writing online is more demanding on learners as it requires multi-literacies, which is a shift in approach from a linear to a more interactive reading and writing approach.

1.1 Some examples of activities in the ACS programme

The reading class provides learners with texts from different contexts across disciplines. The activities are divided into three phases: the pre-reading phase, reading phase and post-reading phase.

1.2 During the pre-reading session

Before learners engage in reading they have to think about reasons for reading a text and bring on board what they know about the subject under discussion and how this relates to their curriculum. To guide this process, learners are given a topic or short text on which they are to find more information. They make a list of questions which they would like to find answers to in relation to the topic. When they have collected their information they make class presentations and bounce their ideas with their peers.

Here is an example of a pre-reading activity. The abstract below is taken from an article entitled The new Diplomatic Agenda – Are governments ready? The following tasks are given to the learners:

a. Before you read the abstract explain what you understand by ‘New diplomatic agenda’.
b. Now read the first sentence of the text and ask two questions you hope the article will answer about the new diplomatic agenda.

Now read the first sentence of the text and ask two questions you hope the article will answer about the new diplomatic agenda. 

c. Read the text quickly and complete the following sentence: The new diplomatic agenda in this abstract refers to -----------------------------------

The new Diplomatic Agenda – Are governments ready?”

For most of the twentieth century, the international diplomatic agenda was seen to consist of questions of diplomacy. After the Second World War new diplomatic issues arose spurred by the technical advances in nuclear energy and electronics. Now in the 1980s, as the century closes, a third set of international problems is emerging: problems that relate to the health of the planet. These new problems will test as never before both the ability of governments to take on new foreign policy activity and the ability of traditional diplomats to negotiate agreements to meet these challenges. For many of these, the existing nation-state diplomatic relationship will not suffice. New patterns of global management will to be developed.


1.3 The reading phase

During this phase learners read the text and explain how it clarifies some of the questions they had in the pre-reading activity. They then check if the text answers all the questions they had for the pre-reading activity. They check for the main argument and support ideas before answering comprehension questions.

1.4 The post-reading phase

This is a time of reflection. Learners reflect on the information they have read. They are asked to apply what they read by discussing new things learnt from the activities in which they were involved in phases one and two. After this they write a summary of the reading text and are encouraged to raise questions that were not answered during the pre-reading and reading phases and discuss these with their classmates. Discussion with peers allows learners to consider different approaches which they can use to reach a solution to a problem.
1.5 Webquests

Another form of enquiry activity used in the Academic Communication skills class is a Webquest. According to Dodge (1995) this is an enquiry-based approach in which information presented to learners is from the internet (web). It is designed to “support learners’ thinking at levels of analysis, synthesis and evaluation” (Dodge 1995:2). Learners are directed to specific sites to perform a series of tasks, develop understanding of one topic at the same time, challenge learners to think and use appropriate strategies to perform the task. The following webquest on the Supreme Court was designed for learners doing law. The following paragraphs detail the steps involved in a typical webquest.

A Webquest on the Supreme Court: Equal protection under the Law

Introduction

Have you ever wondered how the United States Supreme Court makes its decisions? You are about to become a Supreme Court judge entrusted with the power to make the final decision upon a controversial case. Your opinion will become law.

The Constitution grants courts the power of judicial review. The courts can consider and overturn any congressional state legislation or other official governmental action deemed inconsistent with the Constitution, Bill of Rights or federal law.

The Supreme Court has complete power to decide which of the cases, which are referred to it each year, it can overturn. These cases come up when a party, dissatisfied with a lower court ruling, appeals to the Supreme Court. It does not have the authority to issue objections to any law until it is called into question by a lower court case.

Today the case before you is Able v. U.S. This case calls into question the constitutionality of the military's 'don't ask, don't tell' policy with regard to homosexuality.

In order to evaluate this case, you need to use the equal protection clause to the 14th Amendment which says that no State shall 'deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.' As a Court, you must determine whether or not 'don't ask, don't tell' violates homosexuals' equal protection under the law.

The Quest: If you were a Supreme Court Judge, how would you decide the case of Able v. U.S.?

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4 Adapted from Patricia Stohr-Hunt. © 1999-2002
The Process and Resources

In order to decide upon this case, the Court will be divided up into teams. Each team will be responsible for reading a different set of court cases before the Court convenes to deliberate on the case of Able v. U.S. Each team will present the information they gathered and discuss its relevance to this case. They will decide whether or not they agree with the precedents that are set by these cases. After a discussion, each student will vote to either affirm or reverse the lower court's ruling. The learners on the majority side will write the Court's opinion and those on the dissenting side will write another opinion. Both groups must include information on cases studied by each of the teams.

Phase 1 - Background: Something for Everyone

All learners must read the information provided about the Supreme Court in order to gain a general understanding of Court procedures. As judges, their decisions must be based on the constitutionality of the issue, not emotion. Keeping this in mind, learners may want to look at parts of the U.S. Constitution by visiting the following sites for further information:

- United States Constitution
- Supreme Court: History -

Phase 2 - Looking Deeper from Different Perspectives

The Court will be made up of eight learners divided into pairs. Each pair will be assigned to one category. These categories include:

- Racial Discrimination,
- Gender-Based Discrimination,
- Sexual Discrimination, and
- Military Discrimination

Learners in each pair should read through all of the cases provided for the pair, keeping in mind the questions provided, also take note of the style with which the justices write their opinions.

The pairs should discuss the issues in question in each case, the Court's opinion and any dissenting or concurring opinions. Each individual should be prepared to discuss reasons why the Court decided the way it did, and whether or not they agree with the decision.
After the pairs have completed this task the whole group will meet and conduct discussion as if they were the justices assigned to this case.

**Phase 3 - Debating, discussing, and reaching consensus**

Each team has learned about different issues related to the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment.

Imagining that they are judges on the U.S. Supreme Court, who have just been handed the case of *Able v. U.S.*, each of them reads through the case individually and then return for group discussion.

After reading this case, the Court convenes to discuss the facts of the case and focus on how the case relates to others that they had read. Each member would vote to affirm or reverse the lower court's ruling.

The Court then divides into a majority and a minority. The majority side will write the Court's opinion and the minority will write a dissenting opinion. Any student that does not agree with either side may write a concurring opinion.

In writing opinion, precedents provided are used to explain what factors are important to their decision, keeping in mind that they are free to overturn any of the cases or declare any existing law unconstitutional, so long as they support their opinions. They also keep in mind that their decision in this case will be a precedent for lower courts and for future Supreme Court cases, so that they have to make their opinion clear, considering the ways in which it may be interpreted in the future. The Supreme Court does not base its decisions on emotion, but rather the Constitution, law and past decisions.

**Conclusion**

Equal Protection is an issue that will always be called into question before the Supreme Court. Discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality, military service, and various other categories will exist for years to come. It will be interesting to see how the Court will rule on these issues in the future.

**Application**

After they have learnt more about discrimination and protection under the law, students are required to describe how they feel about affirmative action in about 300 words.

Since enquiry-based learning emphasises explicitly research-based study skills and is reliant upon the application of knowledge to solve a problem, it provides a method of allowing learners to use and apply the substantive research that they cover in the
module (Hmelo-Silver 2004). Learners can best gain an understanding of the way that theory transfers into policy and practice; hence, the learning outcome can be met by translating the academic into the practical.

Useful sites on Reading and Writing online include:

- http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/multimedia/
- http://www.thedailyenglishshow.blogs.com/
- http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/
- http://cla.univ-fcomte.fr/english/sites/academic.html

1. The UNISWA experience: Department of Modern Languages (French and Portuguese)

The advantages of Moodle with regard to language teaching have been detailed in various studies such as that undertaken by Klaus Brandl (Are you ready to ‘Moodle’?) in which he cites Brandl (2002), Cziko and Park (2003) and Gonzalez-Lloret (2003). According to Brandl(2005), the layout and organisation of Moodle, as well as its course management features, content, and resources (e.g. the built-in Html editor and the glossary module) all contribute to making it an appropriate language learning and teaching tool as it is based on constructivism and participatory learning viewpoints. Eclectism, which is the most recent pedagogical methodology in language learning and teaching (following the communication model), asks for the use of any appropriate resource, wherever it can be found.

2.1 French

With regard to French, the University has recently decided to suspend the programme, because of the limited number of applicants. It is hoped that through the conversion from a conventional face-to-face programme to a more dynamic, interactive, e-learning programme this number will be raised significantly in the future. At the moment, as there is only one staff member in the Department, limited work towards e-learning activities has been done.

2.2 Portuguese

As the Department only started offering a Certificate programme in Portuguese in the 2009-2010 academic year; it was easier to prepare material for online teaching. A variety of modules has been prepared and should all be available online soon. The activities include listening exercises for which 4 CDs have been recorded so far (PT101, PT102, PT103 and PT104). Another set of 4 CDs will be recorded between June and August 2010, ready for use from August for year 2 courses (PT201, PT202, PT203 and PT204). These CDs
accompany the language use/grammar and the speaking/listening modules. The reading and writing modules have no audio components (this is mainly due to financial constraints).

The enquiry-based components are proposed throughout all modules. For example, in the PT107 and PT108 modules, where the focus is on writing activities, the students are encouraged to go and acquire knowledge about their natural environment and the challenges faced by it, about HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis, etc. They do so at their own pace, in preparation for the writing activities proposed during their classes.

Lesson tasks can be linked to any resources that are uploaded to the teacher’s server or that are readily available on the Internet.

Conclusion

While in our language courses, academic communication skills in English and foreign language learning (French and Portuguese), we concentrate on literacy skills that are composed of, among others, reading and writing skills, visual and information literacy skills, an additional benefit of using Moodle is that the learners are automatically acquainted with a variety of technological and electronic literacy skills as well. Moodle allows for student-based cooperative learning where feedback can be given regularly and immediately on a 'need to know' basis as it were. Because of some inbuilt features, Moodle offers great opportunities for enquiry-based learning. We are yet to analyse Second Life and see whether it can be used as an add-on to a Moodle-based component.

References


The Influence of ODL Materials on Learner and Tutor Preparedness for Tutorials: The Case of LCE

Angelina Khoror
Lesotho College Education

Abstract

Self-instructional materials are perceived as a powerful interactive tool in distance education. For this reason, a deliberate attempt to evaluate their effectiveness in relation to motivating learners to prepare for and participate fully in tutorials is required. This paper examines the influence that ODL materials of the Lesotho College of Education (LCE) have on the level of learner participation in tutorials. Materials developers, programme administrators, and tutors require this type of feedback to improve ODL materials so that learners benefit from better managed contact sessions. Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews conducted from (170) respondents, comprising (130) learners and (40) tutors from (6) administrative regions within which the Distance Teacher Education Programme operates. The study revealed that modules were generally interactive and motivating. However, issues relating to in-text discrepancies, delays in production and distribution of course materials, and tutor-learner relationships affected the learners’ anticipated level of preparation for and participation in tutorials. The results highlighted the need for review of modules, improvements in production and distribution of course modules and more structured forms of ODL orientation for part-time tutors.

Introduction

Self-instructional print materials play an important role in the delivery of open and distance learning (ODL) programmes. However, materials used for this form of education have experienced some criticisms, especially when compared with modern technological devices like computers that are used in delivering ODL.

Some studies have actually questioned the potential that ODL study materials have in making learning an interactive process for distance learners (Roblyer & Ekhaml, 2001; Smith, 1996). However, others have provided insights on the difference between well-designed self-instructional materials and expository texts such as lecture notes and other resources that teachers and trainers use in ordinary classroom teaching (Sparks, 1993; Rowntree, 1993; Carr, Fung, & Chan, 2002). Researchers argue that well-designed, self-instructional materials help learners to develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter and not merely memorise the text.
While the distinction between self-instructional and conventional materials may be of
great value to ODL practitioners, we need to look more closely at the influence that
ODL study materials have on the level of preparation and participation that distance
learners exhibit during face-to-face tutorial sessions. By examining ways that users
of self-instructional materials assess and associate their level of reading with their
participation in tutorials, we may be able to device strategies that specifically target
learners’ problems of preparing and participating effectively in tutorials. Armed with
clear guidelines on fruitful tutorials, tutors may be able to guide learners and monitor
their preparation for and involvement in tutorials more effectively. Despite the
importance of self-instructional materials as an interactive tool for proper planning
and participation in contact sessions, not much seems to have been done to explore
views of those who use materials of this nature in the context of ODL.

Literature Review

Issues on Tutorials in ODL

Tutorials are regarded as an important strategy leading to successful learning
“whenever the student’s knowledge or understanding is insufficient for him/her to
solve a problem” (Jegede and Taplin, 2001:136). Successful learning on the other
hand, cannot be separated from the need for individual learner’s preparedness in terms
of his/her ability to initiate discussions when tutorials are in session. Learners can ask
questions only if they have read course materials intensively to be able to identify
gaps in their knowledge and understanding of concepts.

Being able to initiate individual support can be complicated by a number of factors
(Lewis, 1984; Mays, 2000). These include inadequate time to read, part of the culture
of learners not to ask for help, unavailability of tutors and the fact that second language
speakers do not have the adequate language skills to talk about their problems. Some
of the shortcomings of ineffective face-to-face support would manifest themselves
in the form of problems that learners experience as a result of a mismatch between
theory and practice (Ravhudzulo, 2000; Twinisles, 2002; Obiero, 1997). The success
of face-to-face contact sessions does not exclusively lie on distance learners alone but
also on tutors, too. Tutors can find themselves answering and drawing questions from
the students, re-teaching concepts and assessing the level of student understanding as
any ‘good’ teacher does (Tait, 2003).

Despite these reasons, tutors still expect that at the personal level, distance learners
should take full responsibility for their own learning. Learners should “exercise
independence in terms of planning, timing, and carrying out individual study”
(Bhalalusesa, 2001:164). It could be argued though, that among distance learners,
independence in learning might work better for learners who are motivated and that,
motivation becomes more significant in ODL when learning materials are interactive.
Issues on Interaction in ODL

There is a great shift towards encouraging learners to become actively involved in learning as opposed to being passive receivers of information (Barrett & Johnson, 2003; Butcher & Hope, 2001; Corry & Lelliott, 2003). Learning through distance education is achieved by a balance between the learning activities that the student carries out independently and those which involve interaction with other people (Keegan, 1998). There are different ways in which interaction can occur in distance learning. Cragg, Andrusyszyn and Humbert (1999) assert that interaction occurs between learners and the subject matter as they read the course and write essays.

The assumption is that through some of these activities learners engage in deeper rather than surface learning of the subject matter. According to Holmberg (1986: 2-3), dialogue in distance learning is “indirectly initiated by the presentation of content of study as this causes learners to discuss the content with themselves”. However, for students to be able to interact with ideas in the text, course materials should not only be clear and simple to understand, but they should also be written as though the writer were actually talking with the student, as would be the case in a face-to-face interaction. Learning also takes place when the learner engages in dialogue with tutors who are specialised in different subjects (Waghid, 1998).

The Purpose of the Study

The overall objective of the study was to examine the influence that ODL course materials have on the extent to which learners prepare for and participate in face-to-face contact sessions with facilitators. The study specifically addressed the following questions:

1. What views do distance learners have when using ODL course materials to prepare for tutorial support?
2. How do learners view their level of preparation for and participation in tutorials?
3. What views do tutors have concerning use of ODL course materials to prepare for tutorial support role?
4. How do tutors view the learners’ preparation for and participation in tutorials?
5. In the light of tutors’ and learners’ views, is there anything that should be done differently to improve teaching and learning through ODL materials?
Rationale for the Study

The assumption was that views of the ultimate users of ODL course materials, that is, tutors and learners, would provide constructive feedback for use in the review of modules for a Distance Teacher Education Programme (DTEP) of the Lesotho College of Education (LCE). Once the review exercise is completed and ideas shared, learners in particular, would probably be able to interact ‘better’ with the ideas of module developers.

Interaction and its influence on learning remains an important issue in the provision of ODL. This should be seen in the context that print materials, as one of the modes for the delivery of distance education, requires a more structured and consistent review if it should meet both the objectives of the programme delivered and the needs of the learners concerned. The review is intended to highlight factors that affect effective interaction between self-instructional materials and their users; and how such factors relate to the level of preparation and involvement that distance learners exhibit in tutorials. The study would be particularly significant to various ODL practitioners; namely:

- Programme administrators, as the immediate bodies to plan and ensure that ODL course materials are reviewed whenever necessary;
- Course writers as responsible persons to review and effect meaningful changes in course materials;
- Tutors and learners, who would be the consumers of user-friendly teaching and/or learning materials;
- Other stakeholders in education like parents and the government, as the ultimate parties to benefit from well managed ODL programmes.

Methodology

This study explored the influence that ODL course materials have on the learners’ preparation for and participation in tutorials using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data that provided answers to research questions. Data was collected through these methods so that “both themes and statistical analysis could be presented” (Creswell, 1994:184).

Research setting

The learners investigated were in a Distance Teacher Education Programme (DTEP) of the Lesotho College of Education (LCE). DTEP uses self-instructional materials (modules) to deliver its courses. The modules were written by full-time tutors in the distance education department and part-time staff largely drawn from conventional pre-service programmes.
The DTEP students collect modules during on-campus sessions. All students on the sample were in their fourth and final year of the programme. The group was selected because of the longer time they had spent in the course; hence, their rich experiences in the use of DTEP course modules. Learners came from six clusters, representative of six DTEP regional centres. (A cluster means two or more sites merged together for administrative purposes while a site refers to a ‘constituency’ that comprises a group of learners. Clusters operate as centres for scheduled contact sessions).

The nature of the programme is such that first year learners study eight subjects per semester; which adds up to sixteen courses in a year. These are reduced to ten courses in subsequent years. Courses are split into two categories (CAT). CAT (A) consists of three core courses and two science subjects, while CAT (B) has three core courses and two social science subjects. Learners choose between the two categories and therefore, study five courses per semester from years 2 - 4. Each course is assessed by three assignments so that learners ultimately do either ten or twenty-four pieces of assignments per semester depending on the year of study. Learners also write end-of semester examinations in all courses. They discuss their work orally with their tutors during the six hours allocated for tutorials to each of the six or eight subjects they do in a semester.

Data Collection

Questionnaire

Two types of questionnaires were developed; one for learners and the other for part-time tutors. Full-time tutors were not included in the study. The assumption was that they were likely to be subjective in their evaluation of the modules as they had not only developed them but were also the implementers of the programme. Both questionnaires consisted of three types of question items; namely: close-ended items, seeking factual information; and a three-point Likert-type scale of questions that explored opinions. There were also open-ended items to help elicit information from individuals. Since Chambers et al. (2002) asserted that open-ended questions allow informants to give descriptive accounts of their experiences, it was hoped that informants would provide relevant and objective data where explanations were required.

Questionnaires were sent to 170 respondents, comprising 130 learners and 40 part-time tutors. Learners were in the second semester of their final year of study and had just attended the last tutorial session for the programme. Both questionnaires focused on learners’ and tutors’ attitudes towards the course modules and their beliefs about tutorials organised to supplement those modules. A total of 106 questionnaires were returned by learners, which gave a very good response rate of 82%. Of these respondents, 38 % were males and 62% were females. Tutors who returned questionnaires were 26, which gave a 65% response rate. These consisted of 43 % males and 57% females.
Interviews

In order to investigate both tutor and student perspectives about course materials and their beliefs about tutorials in more detail, in-depth interviews were carried out with sixteen (16) learners whose age range was 26-49 years. Learners came from Categories A and B such that both were equally represented. Their motivation for choosing specified categories were extrinsic rather than intrinsic. Their choices were influenced by the number of subject tutors available for a particular Category of courses and colleagues with whom to share problems.

The 16 interviewees were conveniently selected from both Categories. According to Creswell (1994:148), “purposefully selected informants best answer the research questions” and therefore help to improve the validity of research findings. However, this inference may not necessarily suggest that the findings of this study would be reliable as attempts to generalise the results in small scale studies are often discouraged for various reasons. Interviews were semi-structured with open ended prompts, so that if learners raised other relevant issues, they were encouraged to talk about them (Cohen & Manion, 1985:293). Interviews were conducted face-to-face and were recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

Five tutors were also interviewed to establish their experiences of using self-instructional materials and their practices and beliefs about scheduled contact sessions. The tutors’ ages ranged from 38 to 52 and their subjects of specialisation covered eight of the courses offered through DTEP. Four of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and one via the telephone because of problems of access. Tutors were all experienced in ODL related issues. Three of them had first degrees while two held higher degrees in subjects of their specialisation.

Data Analysis

Classification of themes

Perspectives on both the influence of course materials and tutorials are very important for ODL practitioners. Data for this study were therefore classified into themes that were recorded in the form of statistical tables as they provided simple interpretations of findings. It was also important to consider comments given by learners and tutors. After consideration, they were linked with two broad areas of interest in this study, namely:

1. Assessment of modules as tools for learning (i.e., perceptions on strengths and weaknesses of course modules)
This section focused on:

- level of language used,
- importance of activities in the modules,
- difficulty of students’ assignments,
- relevance of assignment to job, and
- improvements needed on modules.

2. Assessment of tutorials as learning sessions (i.e., perceptions on strengths and weaknesses of tutorials and strategies for improvement)

The focus was on:

- reading in preparation for the tutorials,
- participation in tutorials,
- preferences for teaching/learning approaches in tutorials, and
- strategies for enhanced participation in tutorials.

Findings

Learners’ Experiences of Using DTEP Course Materials

Learners were asked to describe their experiences of using DTEP course modules in the light of five distinct factors; namely, the level of difficulty of the language used in the course materials, the level of difficulty of the activities included in course materials, the importance of such activities, and the level of difficulty of their assignments. These factors were meant to help learners assess the extent to which they were able to interact with course modules.

Learners reported that the language used in DTEP modules was generally simple for them to understand concepts discussed. About 73% of them assessed the course materials’ level of difficulty either as moderately difficult or easy. A majority of the respondents that is, 64% further regarded activities found in their course modules to be average in terms of difficulty. A small percentage (08%) of learners however maintained that the activities incorporated in course materials were of little importance to learners as opposed to a majority of them (66%) who believed that the activities were not only of highly importance to learners, but that they were also highly relevant to the learners’ job. It was interesting to note that tutors generally held similar views to those of the learners in terms of their assessment of DTEP course materials as shown in table 1.1.
Table 1.1: Views of Learners and Tutors on the Interactivity of DTEP Course Materials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables (Type of experience)</th>
<th>Learners’ Stand Point in Frequency &amp; Percentage (N = 106)</th>
<th>Tutors’ Stand Point in Frequency &amp; Percentage (N = 26)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. The level of difficulty of the language used in the course materials/modules</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The level of difficulty of the activities found in course materials/modules</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The level of importance of the activities included in modules to learners</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>56.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>54.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The level of difficulty of the assignments</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The relevance of learners’ assignments to their job as teachers</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Problems Encountered by Learners When Using DTEP Modules

The learners’ experiences of using DTEP course materials were mostly related with the interactivity and the printing and binding of course materials. Results revealed that some modules had:

- sections that were not reader-friendly because difficult subject terminology had been used; such words did not appear in dictionaries that learners used,
misspelled words that lost meaning in contexts where they were used,
inadequate information to help clarify and simplify difficult concepts,
missing or badly bound pages,
wrongly numbered pages, and
faint words that made reading and interpretation of illustrations difficult.

Tutors’ and Learners’ Experiences of DTEP Tutorial Sessions

Both learners and tutors agreed that most learners were not reading and preparing adequately for tutorials, hence, their average involvement in tutorial discussions. A relatively good number of learners (27%) argued though, that their performance was generally of the acceptable standard. They believed that they prepared themselves fully for tutorial sessions. However, both groups of respondents highlighted some of the factors that they felt contributed to the learners’ average and/or low levels of reading and preparations required for the tutorials. These included

- delays by the college to supply learners with course materials (modules) and/or unavailability of some of the modules,
- too many courses to study and assignments to read and prepare for, and
- insufficient time for reading due to work and family related responsibilities.

As a result of inadequate reading and lack of preparation on the part of learners for contact sessions, group work was the learning approach that was least preferred by DTEP learners during face-to-face sessions with tutors. Few learners opted for open discussions while a majority of them chose lecturing by tutors as their most preferred strategy for learning at the workshops; a trend that most of the tutors (54%) had also observed.

Tutors’ Experiences of Using DTEP Materials in Relation to:

1. Level of difficulty of language used

Tutors commented that the level of language used in different course modules was generally simple, clear and appropriate for distance learners. However, they noted that modules, like any other written material, needed reviewing. It should be noted though, that there were no part-time tutors in some clusters for some of the courses DTEP offered. Below are some of the areas that the respondents suggested needed to be improved in different courses:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Courses</th>
<th>Improvements Needed on Modules</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td>• Review and provide detailed explanation of terminology used e.g. behavioural and measurable objectives;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mathematics</strong></td>
<td>• Include more examples of solved problems;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• review examples given to ensure that they are appropriate for students studying on their own;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Correct typing errors;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Provide detailed information on unfamiliar concepts like Egyptian symbols;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Review answers in the post-test activities;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home Economics</strong></td>
<td>• Include examples related to situations in all the Primary Schools in Lesotho. Most of the information is appropriate for schools with well-equipped laboratories;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religious Education</strong></td>
<td>• Provide marking memos for Assignments;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sesotho</strong></td>
<td>• Edit assignments for typing errors;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Science</strong></td>
<td>• Improve diagrams, especially in Module 1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Review terminology used across all modules; e.g. (partial permeable) instead of (semi-permeable) (salivary amylase) instead of (ptyalin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social and Development Studies</strong></td>
<td>• Present detailed indicators of development;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Commercial and Management Studies</strong></td>
<td>• Discuss abstract concepts clearly and fully e.g. writing a research proposal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. **The level of importance of activities included in the modules**

Although tutors had varied opinions about the level of importance of the activities included in DTEP modules, most stated that they were very useful because:

- Most of them were not only learner-centred, but they also gave a good coverage of the courses;
- They helped learners to self-evaluate their learning;
They improved the learners’ thinking and reasoning abilities;
They were mostly related to what should be taught in schools; thus, helping learners to implement the primary school curriculum with competence.

3. Students’ assignments

Tutors commented that:

- Questions for assignments were often within the scope of concepts covered in the modules; learners had to read in order to do them well.
- Sometimes the level of difficulty of assignments was too high; requiring learners to have high school background knowledge, which several of them did not have.
- Most of the assignments were relatively very easy because answers were provided in the modules; hence the increased chances of getting them all correct.
- Practical subjects like Home Economics required tutors and learners to do practical activities as assignments despite the fact that clusters had no facilities.
- Improvisation of needed resources was sometimes not easy.
- Some questions had typing mistakes; often leading to misinterpretation of assignments. They should therefore, be edited before printing.

4. Students’ preferred style of learning in tutorials

It was found that most learners regarded lecturing as the best strategy for tutors to use in face-to-face contact sessions. On the contrary, most of the tutors felt that tutorial sessions would rather be dominated by either group work or open class discussions than lectures. Tutors argued that since learners were being trained as teachers, they should learn how to express their ideas, to participate freely in discussions and to learn from others to be able to teach pupils do likewise. Tutors accepted that lectures might be as important in ODL tutorials as any other methods of teaching.

However, they acknowledged that in the case of DTEP students, a lecture might not necessarily be the best approach for face-to-face sessions but rather, a preferable learning method when learners do not get all the modules for courses that the programme offers. Tutors observed that it was difficult for them to support students in their learning without study materials. Findings from learners revealed that if they received lectures on different courses, they would get adequate information to help them perform better in their assignments and examinations as time scheduled for tutorials was insufficient.
Learners’ Experiences with Subject Part-Time Tutors During Tutorial Sessions

Learners highlighted their experiences as follows:

- Some tutors treated them more like high school students than teacher learners.
- Some tutors come to the tutorials unprepared. As a result, much time got wasted because learners’ problems remained unsolved.
- Some tutors wasted time talking about issues which in view of learners, were of little relevance to assignments and their academic progress.

Learners’ and Tutors’ Suggestions on How Tutorials Should be Improved

Learners felt that the college should:

- Provide them with modules and assignments on time; preferably during on-campus session which normally precedes the beginning of a new semester; and consequently a set of different modules.
- Extend time for on-campus tutorial sessions from two to three weeks so that subject tutors could have more time to prepare them for examinations.
- Ensure that part-time tutors attended scheduled tutorials and that they used time allocated for their courses effectively.
- Engage part-time tutors for all courses offered in the programme; and in all clusters of the programme; so that all subjects may be taught during tutorials.
- Introduce libraries for DTEP clusters by compiling copies of course modules and supplementary reading materials in all courses. These could be distributed to all clusters, on the basis of learner-ratios within the clusters.

Conclusions

The overall objective of the study was to examine the influence of ODL course materials on the extent to which learners prepared for, and participated in tutorial sessions. Learner preparedness is a critical requirement for the success of progress required in the limited time available during tutorials. By examining how learners and tutors viewed their preparation for, and participation in scheduled contact sessions, we should be able to identify factors that affect effective interaction between self-instructional materials and their users; and consequently devise strategies that specifically target learners’ problems of preparing for, and participating effectively in ODL tutorials.

The study revealed that language used in the DTEP learning materials was generally simple, clear and appropriate for distance learners to understand concepts discussed. It further highlighted that activities included in the study materials were valued by
learners because they were relevant to their everyday engagements as teachers. Tutors were found to hold views similar to those of learners in this respect.

Despite the above views, it became evident that modules needed reviewing because of observed in-text discrepancies. Results indicated that:

- Some modules were not reader-friendly, since difficult terms had not been explained, or worse still, such words could not be found in dictionaries;
- There were spelling mistakes which resulted in loss of meanings in contexts where they were used;
- Information in some modules was not detailed enough to help clarify and simplify difficult concepts;
- Unclear words and diagrams made it difficult for learners to read and interpret illustrated concepts with ease.

Apart from the above inconsistencies, the study raised concerns that learners had about working with subject tutors during tutorials. Results demonstrated that, apart from wasting time by talking about issues which learners considered to be of little relevance to assignments and their academic progress, tutors also come to tutorials unprepared. The end result was that much time got wasted because learners’ problems remained unsolved. Another concern involved part-time tutors who did not attend tutorials regularly such that they failed to make effective use of time scheduled for courses that they were expected to teach. These concerns clearly led to further investigations with regard to the general organisation and management of tutorials in ODL.

This study clearly revealed that most learners did not prepare themselves adequately for tutorials; hence their unsatisfactory involvement in discussions during tutorials. It was established that study materials were reader-friendly and that they had no effect on the learners’ lack of preparation for, and participation in face-to-face contact sessions. While the typographic and other related inconsistencies identified in different course modules could have interfered with the ease of interaction between learner and content, such discrepancies were not likely to be the main factors for learners’ insufficient preparation for tutorials. Indeed, other issues that were found included:

- late distribution of, and/or un-availability of course materials;
- too many courses to study and assignments to read and prepare for within a very short time, for example: between one and two weeks; and finally,
- insufficient time for reading due to work and family related responsibilities.

It seemed that these concerns ultimately played a major role in determining the type of teaching or learning approach to be used in tutorials planned for DTEP learners.
Results showed that on the whole, learners preferred to be lectured to during tutorials as opposed to engaging in either group work or open discussions. It was also established that tutors acknowledged that lecturing might not necessarily be the best learning approach for use in DTEP tutorials but rather, a preferable learning strategy in as long as course modules were not available for learners at the time when they needed them. In such circumstances, learners were forced to go for tutorials unprepared. Given this situation, it becomes evident that, the success or failure of tutorials can sometimes be attributed to “the overall management and structure of a distance learning programme” (Anderson, cited in Foskett & Lumby, 2003:142). It seems therefore, that the problems of shortage and/or lack of learning materials become an issue that may require further investigation.

Findings further reflected that if learners received lectures in different courses, they were likely to get more reliable information from subject tutors to be able to do assignments and prepare for examinations. Although this view appeared to have been the best option in given contexts, it was however argued that under normal circumstances, face-to-face tutorials should ideally be facilitated through approaches that encourage interaction between tutor and learner. Other views contested that as learners were being trained and prepared as teachers, they should learn how to express their ideas, to participate freely in discussions and to learn from others to be able to teach pupils do likewise.

While DTEP course materials were commended for their reader-friendliness, there were also concerns that they needed reviewing. A number of issues were identified from different course materials as aspects that needed improvement. These included typographic errors that needed to be rectified. Modules were also expected to provide detailed explanations of important concepts and adequate examples of procedures to be followed in solving problems given in the form of activities. Other concerns were the need for writers to use examples that were related to real life situations in the majority of primary schools in Lesotho, as opposed to examples that focused on few, but well equipped schools. It was felt that some diagrams in the modules should be improved and terminology used reviewed. These views were meant to alert reviewers of ODL materials; particularly those who might be involved in the review of DTEP course materials, about pertinent issues to be addressed during the review process.

Finally, proposals on how ODL tutorials could be improved were made. The general feeling was that learners should be given course materials on time; preferably during the on-campus session which normally precedes the start of a new semester; and consequently, the distribution of new sets of modules for different programmes of study. The introduction of cluster libraries was also encouraged. A collection of resources for such libraries could include copies of DTEP modules and other relevant ODL materials. These could be distributed to all clusters, on the basis of learner-ratios within the clusters. Learners would, at least have copies of modules to borrow
rather than solely rely on tutors to lecture them during tutorials. Alternatively, time for on-campus tutorial sessions could be extended from two to three weeks so that subject tutors could have more time to prepare learners for examinations; especially in a situation where course materials were unavailable.

Recommendations

In the light of the preceding discussions, it is recommended that LCE should:

1. Explore means and ways of counteracting problems that affect the timely production and distribution of distance learning course materials. Learning materials are a critical requirement that aid learner-preparedness for the success aimed to be achieved through tutorial sessions;

2. Consider reviewing modules for distance learners with the view to improve interaction between learner and content and by doing so, ensure quality in the delivery of ODL programmes;

3. Develop more structured forms of orientating part-time tutors into the learner support role; with emphasis on the implications it has for scheduled tutorials. This would help strengthen the learner-tutor relationships with regard the anticipated levels of preparation for, and participation in tutorials from both tutors and learners; and finally,

4. Device strategies that work towards attaining and sustaining the smooth running of the programme so that it may serve the best interests of the learners.

References


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Quality assurance enhancement in a decentralized model of examination marking: Markers’ experiences in the Education department of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) (Masvingo Regional Campus)

Owence Chabaya, Chrispen Chiome & Raphinos Alexander Chabaya
Zimbabwe Open University, Masvingo Regional Campus

Abstract

This study sought to examine the extent to which quality assurance is observed in decentralised examinations marking. Data was collected from 11 markers, in a qualitative case study, using questionnaires and focus group discussions. The results showed that some effort to enhance quality marking was done through brainstorming of marking guides, holding regular meetings during the marking exercise and moderation of marked scripts. It also emerged that confidentiality and objectivity were guaranteed. However, it was also found out that more should be done concerning marker motivation so as to uphold quality in marking. In fact, it was discovered that markers needed more time and that security of scripts was compromised. It was recommended that in spite of cost saving, the marking exercise should be accorded enough time to give justice to the exercise.

Background

Zimbabwe Open University is an open and distance learning institution. Over the years distance education has grown in numbers and respectability. The growth is expected to increase (Neely & Tucker 2010). According to Dekker and Lemmer (1993) quoting Buachalla, today distance education on a world basis has moved from the wings to the centre-stage position in many education systems. Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is relatively a late arrival in the field of distance education. It was established in 1993 as University of Zimbabwe’s Centre for Distance Education, which then became the University College of Distance Education in 1996. It has since revolved to become a fully-fledged university established under a 1999 Act of Parliament. It offers various degree and diploma programmes through distance learning. It has various departments and faculties and has centres in all the ten geographical regions of the country as “it seeks to bring education to the doorsteps of individuals” (ZOU, 2010).

Decentralised examinations marking was introduced to reduce costs while, at the same time, maintaining quality. Examination marking is a very important exercise in any learning institution as it is part of assessment of learners. Examinations have the role of measuring learners’ levels of understanding of the desired concepts and skills. In short, they determine the future of learners. In this case, because they are held at the
end of a semester, they are part of summative evaluation (Makoni, 2000). This kind of assessment is used to provide judgments on students’ achievements in order to:

- establish a student’s level of achievement at the end of the programme,
- grade, rank or certify students to proceed or exit from the education system,
- select students for further learning, employment etc.,
- predict future performance in further study or in employment,
- underwrite a license to practice (Luckett & Sutherland, 2000)

With these responsibilities at stake, it further confirms that the issue under study is a critical one that touches at the nerve centre of a university. Luckett and Sutherland (2000) further assert that it is through examinations that educators exert their greatest power over their students. It is, therefore, vital that markers exercise this power responsibly and accountably by ensuring that assessments of students are both valid and reliable. It is, therefore, important to ensure that decentralization of examinations would not compromise quality.

However, research on examination has had its impact on the conduct of examination marking elsewhere. For example, research has shown that establishment of marking centres in various stations where markers are gathered in one place at a given time shortens the time required for the marking exercise (Luckett & Sutherland, 2000). Such enhancements to the marking process were also found to have economic saving effects. It is, therefore, important to institute enhancements to strengthen the process of developing and grading written examination.

In a bid to save costs, the Department of Education of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), introduced decentralized examination marking in 2007. Each of the 10 Regional Centres of ZOU were allocated some courses to mark in a stipulated number of days. Masvingo Region, a ZOU regional centre, was allocated all teacher education courses and some educational management courses.

In the ZOU, like all other state universities in the country, decision making power was all along vested in the top hierarchy; thus it was run as a centralized organization. However, in its strategic plan of 2005, ZOU set its sights on becoming a ‘world class university by 2009’. In the process, it delegated some powers to regional centres and gave the regions greater responsibility in accomplishing the university’s vision and mission. In support of decentralization, Robbins and Coulter (2005: 308) say, “few organizations could function effectively if all decisions were made by only a selected group of top managers.”

Decentralization is closely related to the delegation of authority to lower levels (Fink, 2005). In other words, decentralization refers to a “degree of power and authority delegated throughout the organization to middle and lower level managers” (Smit & Cronje, 1997:196).
Although authority and operations of some functions of an organization could be decentralized to lower levels or other sections, equally good outcomes would be expected. Desirable outcomes could be achieved through good decentralization. Good practice in delegating includes ensuring the following:

- Clear objectives/expected outcomes,
- Standards of performance are established,
- Appropriate authority is granted,
- Adequate resources are allocated (staff, equipment, expenses and time),
- Clear reporting arrangements are made,
- Team members are encouraged to seek help when needed,
- The task is completed according to agreed standards,
- Those concerned are thanked for their efforts (Cole 2000: 58).

These general guidelines by Cole (2000), if taken on board, can be the bases of good decentralization policy for the university. If these were overlooked, then decentralization will be like sending someone to fight with his\her hands tied to the back.

Two types of decentralization have been identified by Gabriel (1998), namely federal decentralization and functional decentralization. Federal decentralization is where activities are organized as though they are separate operating units with their own markets and are responsible for their own profits and loss, while managers assume complete responsibility for certain stages in the business in functional decentralization. In the case of ZOU, functional decentralization was adopted where the actual marking of examination scripts was decentralized to regional centres, while the processing of marks and results was still to be done centrally at the national level.

Decentralization has its own advantages and disadvantages. By embarking on the decentralization of examinations, ZOU attempted to benefit from the advantages of decentralization. Some of the advantages that could be realized by an organization as a result of decentralization include

- Lower level decisions can be made more easily.
- Lower level management problems can be dealt with on the spot.
- Improved training and initiative in the lower levels of management. In other words, they have an opportunity to develop their decision making skills.
- The motivation and morale of lower level managers is greater when they are entrusted to make decisions rather than always following orders issued at a higher level.
- An organization’s workload is spread so as to allow top level managers more time for strategic planning. (Buchanan &Huczynski, 2004).
On one hand, decentralization benefits lower level managers by preparing them for greater responsibilities and, in the process, experience a great deal of job satisfaction, while on the other hand, it allows top managers ample time to devote more attention to enterprise strategies (Smit & Cronje, 1997). Development of decision making skills, motivation of lower level managers, and the spread of the organization’s work load are important aspects for a university eyeing world class status. In short, decentralization also brings greater involvement in organizational issues and also results in self-monitoring and principled performance. Self-monitoring is a noble characteristic for people in an organization aiming for world class, since it enables them to observe and reshape their performance (Paecher & McCormick, 1999).

However, decentralization may also cause a university to lose some of the advantages of centralization such as uniformity, less planning and reporting procedures. Further, it takes time, effort, and confidence to delegate properly. Cole (2000) says it is necessary to explain what is wanted, answer any questions staff may have, supply them with any resources they need (especially time!), before letting them go away and carry out what is required under decentralized settings. Thus, the department of education was given the initiative to spearhead the decentralization of examinations initiative. It is against this background that this research sought to find out the extent to which decentralization of examination marking in ZOU ensured quality in the marking.

Statement of the Problem

Centralised marking is a costly exercise which requires mobilizing material and human resources and to pay for transport, food, and accommodation to bring markers to one venue. Thus the idea of decentralization was mooted and implemented in the Department of Education which was tasked to pilot this initiative. The research, therefore, intended to establish the extent to which effectiveness and efficiency in the exercise were ascertained without compromising quality, objectivity and confidentiality. In fact, the purpose of the study was to establish how quality assurance was ensured in decentralised examinations marking.

Research Question

This study was directed by the following research question:

Does decentralization of examination marking assure quality in the marking of examinations in the Zimbabwe Open University’s Masvingo Regional Campus?
Sub - Questions

1. Are there adequate resources (both material and human) to support decentralized marking?
2. Do markers display professionalism such as confidentiality, objectivity and security in the marking of examinations through decentralization?
3. How did the management of the marking exercise ensure quality?
4. What were the markers’ attitudes towards decentralized marking?

Methodology

The research was primarily qualitative and it adopted a case study design. Qualitative research seeks general explanations and predictions where the intention is to establish, confirm or validate relationships (Leedy, 1997). This was also the case in this study whose intention was to find out the general information concerning quality assurance in the decentralised examination marking in Masvingo Regional Centre. A qualitative approach to case study is where the study relates to the in depth analysis of a single or small number of units (Hancock, 2002). A case study may be simple or complex. For example, it may be of a child or a classroom of children or an event or happening (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Such a research designed was preferred for this study, which focused on participants’ perceptions of a decentralized marking system based at Masvingo regional centre. As a research design, the case study claims to offer a richness and depth of information not usually offered by other methods (Hancock, 2002).

Bromley (1996: 302) defines a case study as a “systematic inquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe a phenomenon. A case study is also described as a form of descriptor research that gathers a large amount of information about one or a few participants and thus investigates a few cases in considerable depth (Thomas & Nelson, 2001). Therefore, in this research a case study was used to gain in-depth information about the extent to which quality assurance was enhanced in decentralised examinations marking.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005:445) identify three types of case studies. First is the “intrinsic case study” where a case is examined to provide insight into an issue or draw generalisations. The case is of secondary interest because it facilitates understanding of something else. Secondly, there is the “multiple or collective case study” where a number of cases are studied jointly in order to investigate a phenomenon, population or general condition. Although the cases may be similar or dissimilar, they are chosen because it is believed that understanding them would lead to better understanding and perhaps better theorizing about a still larger collection of cases. However, this study falls within the third category, known as the “instrumental case study”, where a case is examined mainly to provide insights into an issue or to draw a generalisation.
Data was collected through focus group discussions and a questionnaire. Focus group discussions were held to encourage a collective response and to identify differences of opinion as well as areas of consensus among the markers (Pratt & Loizos, 2003). Hancock (2002) recommends a focus group size of 6-10, since groups below this limit the potential of the amount of collective information, while larger groups make it difficult for everyone to participate and interact. In this study, data was collected from two focus groups, one with 6 participants and the other with 5. In a focus group, members should have something in common related to the topic under study. In this case, all the participants were tutors involved in decentralized marking. Focus group interviews could be a valuable way of quickly establishing some basic common ground, information and questions for future investigation. However, since information from focus groups cannot be validated on its own, it was supplemented by a questionnaire with open-ended questions.

The questionnaire was preferred because of its economical nature in relation to time and money. It was administered to all markers soon after a marking exercise. Since all respondents were known to the researchers, use of questionnaires was chosen as it guaranteed the respondents’ anonymity and provided environment conducive to giving information without fear of reprisals. Further, the questionnaire was found to be ideal for the size of the sample. The questionnaires were administered at the end of the marking exercise while focus group discussions were held in intervals during the marking exercise. Data was analysed using the thematic approach. Various related factors formed themes to make analysis possible.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

This research generated a number of interesting issues pertaining to quality assurance in the marking of examinations which are discussed below.

Support for decentralization of marking

The markers put their weight behind decentralization and supported the idea. All the markers in the study supported decentralization and this was demonstrated in the following typical statements from their responses:

“It afforded us the chance to work in the comfort of our homes.”
“It is a good idea that allows us to work without family disruptions.”
“Marking at home allows one to concentrate, rest, and resume work when in full energy.”
“It is an interesting challenge that is not disruptive to family life and work.”
“With decentralization there are no hassles of seeking permission to leave work.”
It is interesting to note that decentralization received so much support from markers where they viewed it as of advantage to them and not the institution. Some even went further to say, “The system captures the right pool of experts found in the region.”

This acceptance of the new system of marking is in itself the beginning of assuring quality from a group of willing markers. In other words, decentralisation provides markers with a “degree of power and authority delegated throughout the organisation to middle and lower level managers” (Smit & Cronje, 1997:196). That feeling of being trusted motivates markers to do their best and this usually promotes quality work.

**Professionalism in decentralized marking**

Another area that was commended by markers was the management of the decentralized marking exercise that they viewed as professional and well-coordinated. This was confirmed by the following responses to the questionnaires and focus group discussions:

“Quite professional, markers were afforded time to input professional views.”
“There was good leadership and guidance from coordinators of the marking exercise.”
“The work team concept encouraged quality as members brainstormed marking guides and agreed on amendments.”

Work teams, brainstorming, and professional sharing were cited as enhancing quality in the marking of examinations. Such responses demonstrate that markers felt to be part of the team if they were asked to make inputs in the operations of the organization and that increases their performance. In the process, quality is enhanced.

**Time factor and quality marking**

The time allocated for the examination marking was viewed as inadequate by the markers. They cited time limitations as an obstacle to quality marking during the decentralized marking as indicated in the following statement:

“The exercise was hurriedly done and some marking guides needed corrections.”
“More marking time is required than was allocated this time.”
“Given the time required to produce quality marking, more time is required”
“The deadline is too close if quality marking is to be guaranteed.”

Such sentiments were also echoed by Smit and Cronje (1997) when they pointed out that for decentralization in an organization to yield good results, there is need to have in place clear objectives and expectations as well as establishing standards of performance. Clarifying such expectations and standards need time to be conveyed and discussed with participants in the decentralized situation. Therefore, if ample time
is not allowed for such exercises, quality in the marking would be compromised. In other words, to produce quality marking, markers in this study did not want to be rushed. This stance, from the markers in this study, is supported by Buchanan and Huczynski (2004) who also posit that time as a resource is a requirement if decentralization is to succeed.

Marking guides and quality marking

Marking guides as resource material were cited as central to the achievement of quality marking by the respondents. Some supporting statements from respondents were as follows:

“It captured material from the module.”
“I used a well-focused instrument though it needed changes here and there.”
“Generally okay though there were some inconsistencies in the mark allocation.”

It appears from these responses that a well-focused, consistent marking guide that captures material from the module is required to ensure quality. Although this idea appears to be noble, it may bring challenges if materials from other sources are left out considering that the ZOU tutorial packages are wrapped around existing educational resources and are not stand alone packages (Jung 2007).

Standardization meetings and quality in marking

Standardization meetings were cited as a cornerstone to the achievement of quality in the marking of examinations. The following statements from respondents confirmed this statement.

“Effective contributions were made in the meetings.”
“These meetings helped us iron out challenges encountered by the individual markers.”
“Professional exchanges were free flowing.”
“Meetings were very instrumental in information dissemination that ensures quality in marking.”

The respondents demonstrated appreciation of the value of standardization meetings as they felt that these enhanced communication, which impacted positively on quality marking. Good practice in the delegation of duties requires clear outlining of objectives and expectations and there is improved training, morale and initiative if lower level management is involved in the activities of the organization (Smit& Cronje, 1997).

Confidentiality of examinations

Confidentiality of examinations was also mentioned as pivotal to quality in the marking process. In the exam under study it was upheld by all the markers with the following statements confirming this:
‘Undoubted professionals were contracted to take part in the marking exercise.’
‘There was no outside influence that affected my marking.’
‘Marking was very confidential indeed but transport to and from home with the papers is needed’
‘Marking was very confidential indeed.’

The above responses demonstrate that respondents felt that despite the fact that confidentiality was observed by markers in the marking exercise, the idea could be compromised by lack of transport to and from the markers’ various residences. This was because most of the markers used public transport while carrying examination scripts. However, respondents showed appreciation of confidentiality in the marking process as one marker pointed out that, ‘A student’s script carries the aspirations, hopes and career path for that person.’

It appears markers in this exercise took cognizance of the fact that behind every script, there is a person trying to achieve something in future.

**Objectivity in the decentralized marking process**

Objectivity in the marking process is central to quality assurance in the marking process. This statement was supported by respondents as pointed out in the following statements:

“Objectivity was assured as the marking guides were brainstormed.”
“Adherence to marking guides was observed.”
“I did not allow my feelings to affect my scoring.”
“Moderators checked samples of marked scripts for accuracy and fairness. This enhanced objectivity.”

It appears that respondents felt that objectivity was not affected by decentralization. Moderators were on standby to ensure marking consistency. Thus reliability was also ensured as Luckett and Sutherland (2000) confirm that reliability is concerned with issues of consistency in assessments.

**Marker motivation**

Markers in this study were of the opinion that marker motivation through timeous disbursement of allowances was needed. In the exercise under study, this was the case although the allowances were not adequate as shown in the following responses:

“The allowances were small though but they motivated us to a certain extent.”
“Allowances were disbursed on time.”
“The allowances were readily available when the exercise began. This is a good thing.”
Attaching monetary gains to motivation here appears to contradict Reade’s ideal job list in which Read said graduates put enjoyment at the top of the ideal job wish list (Buchanan & Huczynski, 2004). Further, marker motivation in examination marking must be prioritized. However, lack of funds to motivate participants in the decentralization process is not new. Paulo (2007) points out that any change would also imply additional expenditure where economic development, spending and decentralization are positively associated with growth.

**Security of examination scripts**

The markers in this study expressed reservations on the security of exam scripts through decentralization. In this regard, respondents expressed the following sentiments:

“I have no doubt that these are men and women of high integrity but they put papers at risk as they travel by public transport.”

“There are as many houses at risk as there are markers.”

The markers in the exercise shared the fears that the scripts may not come back intact. These fears appeared real considering the manner in which the scripts moved to and from the centre since most of them used public transport. However, in this study, all the scripts were accounted for at the end of the exercise.

**Future of decentralized marking**

The future of decentralized marking was seen as bright by the respondents. Supporting statements from the respondents were as follows:

“The practice should be upheld for the purpose of retaining part-time markers who cannot take leave from their workplace.”

“It is a very good innovation that has to be nurtured and supported.”

“It is a confidence and capacity building exercise. That is likely to improve quality.”

“Please let’s continue the programme this way; I appreciate your trust in us; we shall repay you through quality work.”

Respondents supported the continuity of the decentralized marking because they saw it as a confidence-building practice and necessary innovation that ensured quality marking. The overwhelming support given to the decentralized marking exercise showed that assessment served social as well as educational purposes (Luckett & Sutherland, 2000).
Conclusions

From the data collected, the following conclusions were arrived at:

- There was overwhelming support for the decentralized marking process which was viewed as a confidence-building exercise that afforded markers the comfort of marking in their homes. Markers were motivated by the fact that they were trusted and involved in decision-making.
- Quality was ensured through brainstorming, moderation and professional management.
- Confidentiality and objectivity were guaranteed as the exercise captured the right pool of experts from the region.
- In addition to moral support from the top management, markers needed material support in the form of stationery and being given enough time for thorough marking.
- Marker motivation was quite low where respondents showed dissatisfaction with the incentives offered, such as the remuneration rates and late payments.
- Security of the scripts was viewed as a cause for concern since most of markers used public transport while carrying the scripts.
- The future of decentralized marking appeared to be bright as it was supported by markers and it is hoped that other departments will learn and adopt this noble initiative.

Recommendations

Basing on the conclusions given above, the researcher came up with the following recommendations:

- The Department of Education of ZOU should continue with the decentralization of the marking of examinations and other departments should learn and adopt the same initiative.
- A pool of Regional markers must be established and trained in the marking of examinations to ensure continuity and hence quality marking.
- Marker motivation is a critical component of quality marking. Thus decentralization must be accompanied by the right incentives such as marking rates for part-time staff and full-time staff and conditions under which the marking takes place so as to promote job satisfaction and in turn, effectiveness and quality of marking.
- There is need to provide markers with enough resources and academic support to enable them to devote more time to the marking exercise, for example, allocating reasonable time for marking to ensure quality.
- There is need to promote the concept of course teams, to develop marking guides that will have minimum errors if any.
• An on-going marker training and or retraining programmes on examination marking must be instituted to enhance marker effectiveness and efficiency in marking of distance education examinations and in the process, maintain quality in marking.

Way forward

Change is not easily accepted in most situations. However, Jack Welch in Paulo (2007:34) points out that, “Willingness to change is strength, even if it means plunging part of the organization into confusion for a while”. In other words, it is realized that there is nothing perfect and an innovation aiming at bringing about some improvement should be tried. By criticizing everything new, attempts for innovations get thwarted and the old and defective system is allowed to continue (Paulo, 2007).

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Challenges faced by learners in the transition from traditional classroom education to ODL: A Case of JC and BGCSE Learners at BOCODOL

Oduetse Otukile
Gaborone Secondary School

Abstract

This article aimed at finding out the attitudes towards ODL held by learners studying secondary school level programmes, namely the Junior Certificate (JC) and Botswana General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE). The study also aimed at establishing why there seems to be a high failure and dropout rate among learners. To this end, the study sought to determine the attitudes of JC and BGCSE learners towards ODL, causes of high failure rate and why was there a high drop-out by learners.

The study was largely informed by the constructivist model where learners create knowledge and the instructor’s [tutor’s] role is that of a facilitator who sets the stage, poses challenges, facilitates discussion and provides tools that support learners as they construct knowledge, either independently or by interacting with one another. This could be achieved through examination of their experiences, i.e. by making meaning of their own world.

Multiple data collection methods used to triangulate data, gain multiple perspectives and ensure rigour include a questionnaire used to gather data from a sample of 40 learners, content analysis, and face-to-face interviews with tutors engaged by BOCODOL. The main conclusion drawn from this study is that most learners, moving from conventional classroom teaching, found it difficult to easily fit into the open and distance learning (ODL) praxis. This is mainly because learners felt that learner support system at BOCODOL was not effectively implemented. This ranged from ineffective tutorials where tutors were late or missed tutorials, some study materials which needed to be reviewed and an ineffective guidance and counselling service. Although attempts have been made in that regard, more can still be done to assist learners to adapt to ODL.

Introduction

The term distance education refers to an educational approach in which there is a quasi-separation of the learner and the teacher in time and space (Keegan, 1996), while open learning is seen as a philosophical construct that seeks to remove barriers and constraints that may prevent learners from accessing and succeeding in quality lifelong education.
Learner support is essential for a successful distance learning environment. This is particularly true for learners who have been used to the traditional classroom learning environment where there was the presence of a teacher. Learner support in distance education generally consists of the three pillars of administrative, tutorial and guidance and counselling support.

1. **Administrative support**
   - This covers areas such as student enrolment, provision of information such as fees, examinations and so on.

2. **Tutorial support**
   - This normally adds the human voice to the printed packages and they could be face-to-face tutorials, support at a distance through telephones and marked assignments, radio lesson etc.

3. **Guidance and counselling support**
   - This involves organisational support for learners with subject choice and career guidance, time management, reading and writing skills, examination skills and motivation and encouragement (Modesto & Tau, 2009).

According to Rowntree (1992), ODL learners usually work with packages of materials, but a package is hardly enough. Most learners will need support from human beings who can help them with their learning and respond to them as individuals, in order to assist them cope with the unfamiliar learning environment.

The problem that the study intends to solve is that learners seem to depend too much on the tutor and they seem not to be performing well in their subjects. The aim of this study is to find out the attitudes of learners towards ODL. The study also aims at establishing why there seems to be a high failure and drop-out rate by learners. This study was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the attitudes of JC and BGCSE learners towards ODL?
- Why is there a high failure rate by JC and BGCSE learners?
- Why is there a high drop-out by learners?

This study adopts the constructivist model. This model assumes that individuals learn better when they create knowledge by actively constructing a representation of the material being taught and that each learner’s unique experiences influence the way in which he or she understands and assigns meaning to the material (Jonassen, 1996). The instructor’s [tutor’s] role is that of a facilitator, setting the stage, posing challenges, facilitating discussion and providing tools that support learners as they construct knowledge (Salomon & Almog, 1998).
The research context

The Botswana College of Distance and Opening Learning (BOCODOL) is one of the relatively new open and distance learning institutions (celebrated 10 years of existence in 2010) in the Southern Africa. BOCODOL offers a number of programmes such as certificate, diploma and degree programmes. In addition, there are school equivalency programmes, namely the Junior Certificate (JC) and the Botswana General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE). The duration of the JC programme is up to 5 years. The core subjects in this programme are English, Mathematics, Social Studies, Setswana, Agriculture, General Science, Moral Education and Religious Education. The optional subjects are Bookkeeping and Accounting, Commerce and Office Procedures. The BGCSE programme’s duration is up to 4 years and learners can take subjects like English language, Setswana, History, Mathematics, Commerce, Geography, Human and Social Biology, Science Single Award, Development Studies, Accounting and Business Studies.

Most of the learners who enrol for these programmes are those who did not perform well in the ‘mainstream education’, particularly from government schools who may like to upgrade their grades. These are normally the out-of-school youths and adults. Such learners had spent a considerable amount of time in classroom education. Classroom/conventional education is characterised by among others, the regular presence of the teacher and other learners in the classroom, the teacher explains to the class and learners may copy notes or make their own notes. The distance learning praxis thus puts them in a rather unfamiliar environment. It is worth noting that some of the learners may be those coming back to the learning environment after having spent some years away from any educational setting. Such distance learners are more likely to experience challenges when it comes to learning (Dzakiria, 2004; Knapper, 1988; Donald, 1997). Their transition into becoming Distance learners may not be an easy one (Saw et al., 1999).

Method

The sources of data for the study include learners and tutors. A survey design was used in this study. A sample was drawn from one of BOCODOL’s study centres in Gaborone. The sample comprised 40 learners, who were randomly selected. The instrument used to gather data was a questionnaire. Both open ended and close ended questions were used in the questionnaire.

Furthermore, one-to-one interviews conducted with individual tutors to get their views and feelings regarding the challenges learners faced were also used. Document analysis was another method used in this study. Thus, multiple methods, both quantitative and qualitative, were used to ensure rigour. The idea of multiple methods or triangulation is that, just as a stool is more solid if it rests on three legs rather than one or two, information collected will be more solid if it is collected from more than one source, at more than one point in time, in a number of different ways (Branigan, 2002).
Qualitative data was generated from oral interviews and document analysis. Questionnaires produced mainly quantitative data. Qualitative data was analysed descriptively where data was checked for themes or patterns and to establish relationships between it so as to facilitate easy interpretation. To determine the attitudes of learners, a Likert scale was used to ask respondents to indicate strength of agreement or disagreement where there were some statements on a five-point scale. Quantitative data was coded and analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences).

Limitations

The main limitation of this study is that a small sample (40 respondents) was used. There are two major reasons for this. The first cause is that questionnaires were distributed at the time when learners were about to sit their final examinations. As a result, most of them did not turn up for tutorials where the researcher could find them in their different tutorial sessions. The other reason for a small sample was time constraints as the researcher had to gather data and produce this article in a short period of time. However, the results from this small size can possibly be generalised to some degree as triangulation was used in the study. A larger sample could be more representative of the whole population though.

Findings

The demographic data of the participants who responded to the questionnaire indicate that most of the respondents (60%) were teenagers (15-19 years of age) and the a few (7.5%) were in their thirties or older. Many of them were females at 65% while 35% were males. Seventeen of the respondents were JC up-graders. Many of the respondents (70%) were new to ODL, that is, they were in their first year of their programmes at the time of the study.

The majority of learners (75%) indicated that learning through ODL proved to be difficult for them. The following are some of the quotes from their responses when asked if it was easier or difficult for them to learn through ODL:

1. “It’s very difficult for me because there is no teacher who stands in front of you and teaches the whole syllabus, we are struggling”.
2. “Because here in BOCODOL tutors are not teaching like at government schools so I, as a beginner there are things [referring to topics or concepts] that I did not meet anywhere so it is difficult.”
3. “It needs a lot of time because those books are so many”.

However, there were those who believed that they are able to study well under ODL since they are able to perform other duties before coming for tutorials.
One of the responses said, “I can study and do some important things at the same time like looking for a job”.

When asked if BOCODOL should adopt the teaching method used in the conventional classroom, almost all of them (95%) agreed. In addition, about three quarters of the learners interviewed indicated that they depend too much on their tutors for effective learning.

A majority of respondents (90%) revealed that there was no orientation organised for them prior to starting tutorials at their study centre to prepare them for studying through ODL. They, thus, indicated that they were not aware of the major differences between the methods of learning between conventional learning and ODL.

**Face-to-face tutorials**

Using the Likert scale, respondents were asked to rate the support they acquire from the tutorials which are scheduled for one per week. The ratings were ‘strongly agree’, ‘agree’, ‘disagree’, and ‘strongly disagree’. A few respondents (15%) strongly agreed that face-to-face tutorials are an effective form of support to them. Almost a third (14, N=40) strongly disagreed (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face tutorials are very helpful to me</td>
<td>6 15.0</td>
<td>9 22.5</td>
<td>11 27.5</td>
<td>14 35</td>
<td>0 0.0</td>
<td>40 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study materials are very helpful to me</td>
<td>3 7.5</td>
<td>24 60.0</td>
<td>7 17.5</td>
<td>6 15</td>
<td>0 0.0</td>
<td>40 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The BOCODOL library is very helpful to me</td>
<td>5 12.5</td>
<td>20 50.0</td>
<td>6 15.0</td>
<td>9 22.5</td>
<td>0 0.0</td>
<td>40 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance and counselling services are very helpful to me</td>
<td>3 7.5</td>
<td>6 15.0</td>
<td>15 37.5</td>
<td>9 22.5</td>
<td>7 17.5</td>
<td>40 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of the reasons they cited include:

1. “Some tutors come late and this may lead to poor performance”
2. “Some of our tutors are not cooperative and sometimes use tutorials to recruit us to their private tutorials at an extra cost. The learners who are not enrolled in this private tuition are often given a raw deal during BOCODOL tutorials.”
Study materials (with emphasis on print materials)

As indicated in table 1.1 above, a majority of respondents (67.5%) agreed that the study materials were helpful to them. A few (15%) strongly disagreed.

According to them, the study materials were helpful and easy to use. However, they complained about errors in some materials, some of which appeared not to have been thoroughly checked for typos. One of the respondents complained as follows,

“I have doubts about whether BOCODOL is following the correct syllabus since some content appear to be different from the one followed by government schools”.

Some of the tutors who were interviewed also complained about study materials for some subjects which according to them, needed to be reviewed.

BOCODOL library at the Gaborone regional office

Nearly two thirds of the respondents (62.5%) revealed that they make use of the BOCODOL library at Gaborone regional office. Almost a quarter of the respondents strongly disagreed that the library has been useful to them. Those who disagreed believed that it is not well stocked with reading materials.

Guidance and counselling at BOCODOL

On the attitudes of learners towards the Guidance and Counselling services offered at BOCODOL, a majority (60%) disagreed that they were benefitting from such services and only 7.5% strongly agreed.

Some respondents indicated that they were not aware of such services. It was also revealed from the interview with some tutors that they were not aware of such a service. They were not even aware of the role they play in guidance and counselling as BOCODOL tutors.

The study also revealed that most of the learners interviewed (62.5%) were not happy with their overall performance from the tutor marked assignments (TMAs) and mid-year exams that they had written as at the time of study, while 37.5% indicated satisfaction on their performance.

Discussion

Some conclusions can be drawn from the findings of this study. The fact that the majority of the respondents were young people aged between 15-19, who also were mainly JC up-graders and BGCSE beginners implies that they were fresh from the
conventional classroom education system and were still used to that mode of learning. As a result, they found themselves in an unfamiliar territory in open and distance learning. Thus, they face the challenge of adapting to this new way of learning. Another interesting finding from this study that contributes to the learners’ challenge is that they had never been prepared beforehand, to the ODL praxis as there was no orientation prepared for them by the institution prior to commencement of study. One may say they could have experienced some shock as the ‘classroom’ was different. Saw et al (1999) argues that there is need to prepare a ‘survival kit’ that specifically guides potential students on what to expect after enrolling for a distance learning course, and on enhancing academic skills in the distance learning environment.

It came as no surprise to have come across findings such as a response where the majority of learners (95%) were of the opinion that the learning methods for conventional classroom were better than those for ODL. In addition, they revealed that they relied more on their tutors, which might probably mean that they are unable to study on their own. Interestingly, ODL learners’ teacher is supposed to be ‘in print’, that is the print study materials or units. This is something that distance learners are supposed to be made fully aware of as such materials have activities to facilitate learning and also there are self-assessment exercises with feedback provided. However, some study units were said to be poorly written and needed to be reviewed. This means learners could not get maximum benefit from such study materials.

BOCODOL’s learner support system is supposed to be bridging the gaps and challenges outlined in this study. However, it appears that the learner support needs to be more effectively implemented and rolled out to learners. According to Simpson (2002) there are many critical issues that call for effective learning support, namely, decisions about starting study; feelings about becoming a student, motivations for learning, finding the time for learning, tackling course materials, planning the learning; tackling the assignments and dealing with failures.

From this study many learners indicated that they were unhappy with the manner in which face-to-face tutorials are conducted. This suggests that they do not benefit much from tutorials. Some of the reasons they cited included late coming by some tutors and those who absent themselves. In a study in Malaysia, Dzakiria (2005) found that learners were frustrated by lack of a permanent presence of a teacher and that teachers did not really understand this frustration by learners, possibly due to the fact that a majority of them (teachers) are “products” of face-to-face institution themselves. As such:

a) They do not have any distance training and experience as far as developing distance course material is concerned.

b) They may be subject specialists, but with very little or no experience in DE

c) They have not experienced the frustration that a distance learner does.

d) They may not understand what is involved for the student in being deprived of face-to-face interaction with their distance teachers.
Some learners revealed that some tutors even recruit learners for private tutorials at an extra cost and this may disadvantage those who cannot afford. A majority of respondents (85%) indicated that they were not working so it might be difficult for them to pay for additional private tutorials. Nonetheless, the institution needs to be applauded for the weekly face-to-face tutorials which are conducted at the Community Study Centres. Face-to-face tutorials are part of universal best practice in learner support services (Gatsha, 2007; Yorke, 2004; Thorpe, 2002).

Some learners revealed they did not benefit much from the use of the library at the regional office in Gaborone. They also did not get guidance and counselling support offered by BOCODOL, whether at the regional office or study centre. This suggests that the tutors may not be carrying out this duty effectively. One of the tasks of a tutor is the provision of such a service. The BOCODOL Community Study Centre-Supervisor and Tutor-marker Guide lists this as one of the role of the tutor in this regard and specifically mentions;

a) Career and subject choice guidance

b) Meeting learners’ organisational needs, such as time management, reading skills, writing skills, examination skills and so on

c) Providing motivation and encouragement.

It appears this is not implemented. Therefore, learners facethesechallenges as they try to transition from classroom teaching to distance learning. One may, thus, conclude that these are the causes of the poor performance/high failure rate which a majority cited and possibly the high drop-out rates.

Conclusion

This study set out to find out the attitudes of learners towards ODL. The study also aimed at establishing why there seems to be a high failure and drop-out rate by learners. The main conclusion that may be drawn from this research is that most learners found it difficult to easily fit into the ODL praxis from conventional classroom teaching. This is mainly because the learner support system at BOCODOL is not effectively implemented. The problems ranged from ineffective tutorials where tutors are late or miss tutorials, while some study materials needed to be reviewed and an ineffective guidance and counselling service.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made, based on the findings of this study.

• There should be workshops for all tutor-markers engaged by BOCODOL for an effective learner support system at study centres. This is because those are people who are on the ground and have closer contact with learners most of the time.
• BOCODOL tutors need motivation to be able to perform their duties with diligence. Therefore, an attractive rate per hour and other incentives have to be put in place. This might help to reduce incidents of tutors recruiting BOCODOL learners to come for private tuition so that tutors make extra money.

• While the author is aware of the on-going writing and reviewing of study materials, at the time of this study, BOCODOL should ensure high quality standards are met before the finished product is dispatched.

• There is need to arrange an orientation for new learners, particularly those enrolled for school equivalency programmes to make them aware of what ODL entails and the challenges to expect.

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Stress in open and distance learning: Experiences of learners studying for an MA programme at Indra Ghandi National Open University (IGNOU)

Godson Gatsha
Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the nature of stress experienced by distance learners in five SADC Member States, their coping strategies, as well as the effectiveness of such mechanisms in the light of best practices in the provision of distance education. Life histories of six distance learners in each country were explored through in-depth interviews and e-mail exchanges. The findings of this study indicate that ODL learners unlike traditional face-to-face learners face a huge pressure from the environment which exposes them to various degrees of stress due to a number of factors such as increased isolation, family issues, work pressure, financial issues, time constraints and delayed assignment feedback. However, ODL learners rely on multiple coping strategies that are particularly pertinent to ODL circumstances. The study underpins the centrality of attraction and retention of learners in ODL programmes. The paper argues that new boundaries of sustainable ODL scholarship in SADC contexts should therefore explore a wide range of support mechanisms to help learners cope with stress in order to complete their programmes with minimum stress.

Introduction

Distance education (DE) is now an accepted mode of delivery the world over. In southern Africa it has gathered momentum from the 1960s when it mainly used the correspondence mode. However, following the global transformation of distance education in the 1980s that resulted in the adoption of modern Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), the southern African countries find themselves lagging behind the developed countries in most aspects of open and distance education. In order to catch up, efforts have to be made towards the professional development of DE staff among other things. Such efforts are currently being undertaken through institutional partnerships with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Commonwealth of Learning (COL), Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and Southern African Development Community, Centre for Distance Education (SADC-CDE). Efforts between the COL and SADC-CDE have seen 60 distance education practitioners in the southern African region being enrolled to pursue the Master of Arts in Distance Education (MADE) at IGNOU.
Southern Africa records a high rate of employed and unemployed out-of-school youths and adults who are studying through the distance education mode. However, there are few professionally trained distance education practitioners engaged to design distance education materials and provide appropriate learner support services that meet the diverse needs of distance learners. It is this need for professionally qualified distance education practitioners which necessitated the professional development initiative through IGNOU. However, distance education learners enrolled in the MADE programme in 2008 have not been able to complete the programme within the minimum two years. The reasons for this are varied and include challenges related to stress typically experienced by most distance learners.

Although traditional face-to-face students face hassles as they journey through their learning just like distance education learners, the later experience more problems because of their varied commitments at work and at home. A typical experience of a learner’s hassle around examination time or on a scheduled test is best explained below:

You are a distance learner and have a test scheduled for 9 am the following day. You study till late and finally set an alarm and get to sleep at 3.30 am. You wake up only to discover that the alarm either did not wake you up or failed to ring and it is 8.30 am. You have only 30 minutes to dress and drive 15 minutes to the examination venue. After jumping into the shower, you discover the hot water is off and you have only cold water. Unfortunately, your last pair of clean jeans is ripped off and you must wear the dirty jeans off the floor. As you head for the car, you notice that the left front tire is flat and you have no choice but change the tire, wasting precious minutes in the process. Finally, it is 8.55 am you are in the car and only a few minutes from the examination venue. You are in a line to turn to the examination venue when the car in front of you stops when the light turns amber. Finally, you park at the public parking area, and run at great speed to the building, and only to see a note on the door test postponed to next week. (extracted from http://sage-ereference.com/psychology)

Is it possible to avoid such hassles? How would the accumulation of such annoying incidents affect a distance learner? What strategies would a distance learner use to deal with such events?

The purpose of this study was to explore events such as described above, in the light of stress experienced by distance learners in five Southern African countries, namely Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius and Zambia. The study was guided by the following research questions:
1. What are the stressors that learners experience during the course of their learning at a distance?

2. How do the learners cope, in the light of the stressors they experience as they learn at a distance?

Understanding stress

The study of stress is not new it dates back to 1822 when a French mathematician Augustin Cauchy first coined the term ‘stress.’ Unfortunately, most of these studies, including those by Giancola, Grawitch and Borchert (2009), Klink, Byars-Winston and Bakken (2008), Watson and Fouche (2007), Iwasaki and Mactavish (2005), McCormick and De Nobile (2005), Shaikar, Kahaloon, Kazmi, Khalid, Nawaz, Khan and Khan (2004), Trenberth and Dewe (2002), Jordaan, Spangenberg, de Jesus and Conboy (2001), and Lazarus and Folkman (1984), were carried out in developed contexts. On the other hand, comparative studies from developing contexts, particularly Southern Africa, which focus on how distance learners experience and cope with stress have been difficult to locate.

Government of Botswana (2008) defines stress as a complex process involving the interaction of internal and external events in the person’s life, which may result in positive or negative outcomes. Stress is, therefore, also seen as a normal part of daily life and a natural reminder that people need to take action to protect their bodies, mind and spirit against illness and injury. Similar definitions on stress have been given by Giancola, Grawitch and Borchert (2009), Watson and Fouche (2007), Iwasaki and Mactavish (2005), Shaikar et al (2004), Trenberth and Dewe (2002), Jordaan, Spangenberg, de Jesus and Conboy (2001) and Lazarus and Folkman (1984).

While the conceptual framework for this study draws from a wider literature base, the central focus is Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) theoretical framework (Figure 1), which states that stress results from an imbalance between demands and resources or when pressure exceeds one’s ability to cope. Several categorises of stress can be identified, including:

- Anticipatory stress –is felt in advance of a situation that is perceived as unpleasant,
- Time stress – results from pressure to meet a real or imaginary deadline,
- Situational stress – occurs when one is in an unpleasant situation, such as waiting for a result of an examination that was perceived difficult,
- Encounter stress – results from pleasant or unpleasant encounter with other people,
- Chronic stress –is prolonged stress without the ability to recover, renew or refuel,
- Residual stress - occurs when the body fails to return to its normal status.
It is evident from these categories that stressors tend to be simple events or circumstances that entail emotional, physical, and mental adjustments in order to cope. Coping strategies, on the other hand, refer to an individual’s cognitive and behavioural efforts (problem- or symptom-focused) to manage external and internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding a person’s resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). While the intention of symptom-focused (avoidance/disengagement) coping strategy is to regulate stressful emotions, problem-focused (approach/engagement) changes the person-environment relation that is perceived as the cause of stress. Individuals use symptom-focused coping strategies to minimize anxieties through physical or mental withdrawal from the situation or by avoiding the problem and using coping strategies to face and change the situation. Problem-focused coping strategies are associated with positive outcomes whilst symptom-focused coping strategies are associated with negative outcomes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The assumption for this study was that: distance learners experience stressors that fall within the six categories and have developed coping strategies in order to negotiate their successful learning to complete the MADE programme.

**Figure 1**: Hypothesized Model of Stress for Distance Learners

The findings of this study are explained using the conceptual framework described above and the theoretical framework adapted from Lazarus and Folkman (1984) that is hypothesised in the model shown in Figure 1 above.
This model uses two categories of coping behaviour; namely, adaptive and maladaptive coping behaviours. Adaptive coping behaviours are those that lead to constructive, healthy psychosocial outcomes for the individual and maladaptive coping behaviours are those that have a negative impact. An interpretive research paradigm was used to explore the stress experiences of distance learners.

Research Design and Methodology

An interpretive paradigm informed the design of this study and a case study approach was adopted. An interpretive paradigm involves taking people’s experiences as the essence of what is real for them (Creswell, 2005). A qualitative research design was therefore deemed appropriate and was adopted for this study because of the interest in acquiring an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the concerned distance learners. Rapport based on a sense of shared understanding and empathy (Davies & Dodd, 2002) was established by the researcher with the research participants. All the 30 participants had at least a first degree, and 66% had been classroom teachers before, while 33% previously worked as adult educators before being employed by DE institutions. All respondents had at least five years working experience in a distance education environment and received support from their institutions in their efforts to improve their professional qualifications.

Life histories of participants of this study were explored between 2008 and 2010, through in-depth interviews, e-mail exchanges and conversations during academic counselling workshops in their respective countries. From participants’ experiences sense was derived through interactive conversations and by carefully listening to and capturing what they said. Data from interviews and conversations was transcribed and grouped into distinct themes and verbatim quotes were used to validate the findings.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that not only did distance learners in the five SADC Member States have similar learning experiences but they also adopted similar strategies to cope with stressors they encountered as they studied at a distance. The stressors that were common among the respondents included family issues, work pressure, financial issues, time management and feelings of isolation. Among the coping strategies used to cope with these stressors were physical exercises, focusing on study goals, taking days off or study leave, implementing time management plans and drawing solace on the feeling that there were others in worse positions. Thirty-three percent of respondents made negative appraisals; showing that they adopted maladaptive coping strategies, while 66% made positive appraisals, indicating that they employed adaptive coping strategies in order to negotiate their learning at a distance. The findings are presented through the main themes as follows:
**Family issues**

Family issues were mainly identified by distance learners who were married as a major contributing factor towards stress with studies. For example, family demands called upon distance learners to perform certain family duties and some of the demands usually competed with their study schedules. They found themselves without enough resources to meet the demands. While working and living away from their families appeared to encourage study, they reported that when family members reported unpleasant issues like death through short messaging system, more often their studies were affected negatively. And when they received pleasant messages about marriage celebrations their studies were similarly affected as their attention was drawn towards the celebrations and at times worried about missing such celebrations. The family issues were usually dealt with directly but there were cases where those who were living far away from their families indicated that they sometimes ignored family demands. However, the family, along with friends who were engaged in studies were also perceived as instrumental for support. The common coping strategies by those who identified family issues as stressors was that they chose to look for social support from family members and friends and did some meditation and exercises. For instance one had this to say:

*I normally take a long distance walk of about 5 km or just do indoor exercises.*

**Work pressure**

Stress was also caused by workload as a result of various factors that included; poor delegation, frequent meetings, introduction of new programmes, incompetent or poorly trained staff, absence of other staff due to either illness or other commitments. The participants claimed they were thus forced to cover up for those absent and this forced them to work long hours. This is how one participant described her situation:

*The workload during the day is exhausting me and contributes greatly to my stress. The workload leads to my failure to submit assignments on time and after submitting assignments the turnaround is frustrating because every time there is delayed feedback.*

When learners have huge workloads, they are more likely not to perform to their best level both at work and in their studies unless they adopted effective coping strategies. However, to counter stress presented by workload, participants applied positive reinterpretation of their circumstances by finding alternatives such as reporting early to work or knocking off late. They actively coped by adjusting their study plans. This is how one participant responded:
I have taken to coming in very early in the morning; up to 1hr, and leaving late after work; up to 1hr 30 minutes. This ensures that I have at least 2hrs 30 minutes of reading time every week day, plus up to 8hrs over the weekend when things are really busy. Sometimes it has been necessary to take study leave.

Such coping measures ensured that distance learners remained focussed on their study goals.

Financial issues

Despite being employed, distance learners also claimed that they experienced stress that emanated from financial issues. Stress associated with finance appeared to arise from a number of incidents which included; poor personal budgeting, excessive borrowing without capacity to pay back, living beyond one’s means, and the availability of loan clubs called “motshelo” in Botswana and cash loan companies. Some distance learners indicated that they had debts which they were not able to service timely and the interest on the loans taken increased their burdens and that affected their concentration when studying. One participant said:

Financial stress, I am paying heavily and this leaves me with very little to sustain the family.

In order to deal with financial stress some resorted to more borrowing. There appeared to be a pattern where one would borrow from John to pay Jane and it meant one was perpetually in debt year in and year out. The effect of this was maladaptive coping which involves venting anger unnecessarily on institutional authorities, constant complaints in that they were overworked and underpaid and that some of their colleagues were being paid more albeit holding the same qualifications. This behaviour led some to temporarily disengage from their studies.

Inadequate time for study

The claim of lack of time for study was raised by all participants and this is how two participants expressed the issue of time constraints.

First participants: The issue of making time to study is one of the major challenges in my studies.

Second participants: I have little or no time for studies due to work and family commitments!

Whilst the issue of time for study as a constraint was genuine, it appeared that for some it was just an excuse, because they made time for other issues like hanging out and drinking each day after working hours and during weekends. The majority
of males also had the time to go and watch football matches. The issue of time appears to border on poor time management and poor prioritisation. Female learners appeared to reorganise their time and used better time management strategies such as reprioritising their activities more than males. This was probably due to the time pressure they experienced in balancing family and work roles. Conversation with males revealed a carefree attitude towards time management, and this explains why female learners were submitting more assignments than males despite the lack of or delayed assignment feedback.

Delayed feedback

Upon registration for the programme, participants had high expectations from IGNOU, but were quickly disappointed when study materials were not forthcoming and academic counselling sessions were conducted very late in the course of their studies. One participant’s response seemed to sum up the views of the other participants when she said;

All the necessary support, that is study materials and academic counselling sessions, came very late, resulting in us not having enough time between our busy work schedules and self-study hence affecting our submission of assignments and examination preparations.

Assignments are critical in DE since teaching and learning is conducted through them. The strain experienced when feedback is not forthcoming was expressed by all participants. The challenge of delayed feedback support caused learners to panic and the combined pressure from paid work and school assignments increased their stress levels. Basically all participants were not impressed by the way IGNOU supported them, citing delays in getting study materials and feedback. For instance, they expected prompt feedback on assignments and other academic queries but this was always not the case. This is how some participants expressed their expectations;

First Participants: I expected timely feedback and interaction with the IGNOU
Second participant: I expected to have feedback on time
Third participant: I expected to write assignments and getting feedback on time

The expectation of timely feedback is common to every learner and it becomes critical when a distance learner is far away from a DE providing institution. The psychological distance and the transactional distance become more pronounced and lead to more anxiety and frustrations. Such feelings can be stressful as indicated by the IGNOU MA distance learners from southern Africa, who confirmed that delayed assignment feedback generated anxiety and stress. This is what some participants shared to be a cause of stress.
First Participants: Delayed assignment marking and responses which came after writing examination and as a result feedback was not useful.

Second participant: Delayed feedback on the assignments mailed for marking.

It seems that completing assignments and not getting feedback or getting it only after writing examinations frustrated learners and caused stress that led to low morale and some learners contemplating withdrawing from their studies. Echoing what distance learners experienced, a Malawi country MA learner coordinator through email had this to say:

There has been a lot of silence from IGNOU. No acknowledgement of assignments when submitted, no information on what’s going on with examinations this year. Very few marked assignments returned to students. It’s a very frustrating situation. Have you any news on what is happening? Please let me know. It seems it’s rather late for the MADE students to do anything about the Dec 2009 TEE. IT IS A VERY DESP ARATE SITUATION. PLEASE HELP WITH INFORMATION/UPDATE.

Yet Open and Distance Learning (ODL) best practice emphasises the need for a DE institution to be learner-centred and to ensure prompt response to learners no matter the how far away the learner is from the learning providing institution. However, this seems not to have been the case as indicated in the excerpt from the mail above. The email indicates that the stress generated by delayed information or absence of information on assignments and examinations from IGNOU was not only limited to participants but it also affected local country coordinators. The Malawi coordinator’s email was corroborated by another e-mail from the Botswana coordinator which reads:

.....communication breakdown with IGNOU......does not respond to queries relating to MADE from the learners even from so called country coordinators. The last time we tried via the Tele-education conference the official at IGNOU totally ignored the request …Lack of feedback on assignment long submitted…. lack of feedback on approved projects despite follow up by both learners and my e-mail have gone unheeded. Now the programme has gone beyond the timeframe allotted but not because of learners and not even a modicum of explanation advanced for such breakdown. In general poor communication and lack of reciprocal response to queries makes it a “nightmare” to work with IGNOU.

The non-response by IGNOU articulated in the e-mail depicts the sentiments received from all participants and the frustrations experienced tell the extent to which stress was felt by participants. The email from the coordinator from Mauritius further corroborates the views expressed and it reads:
On the whole some experienced difficulties with feedback on assignment which reached them very late. Had this been timely, then they will have been better guided in forthcoming assignments. Some tutors at IGNOU were very helpful while others were not so helpful when approached by learners on an individual basis.

The experiences of learners in Mauritius were similar to those of learners from the other four countries. The anxiety that emanates from waiting for assignments to be returned can be stressful. Despite the hardship and stress experienced from the relationship with IGNOU the participants were goal-driven and committed to studying at a distance. Their commitment was driven by the desire to get certified as professional distance educators. They indicated that they held on studying because they wanted a qualification that validated their distance education involvement and experience. This goal helped them cope with the challenges of stress which were generated by delayed assignment feedback and non-response to academic queries by IGNOU. Whilst learners were goal focused they still experienced isolation as there was lack of interaction with IGNOU.

Isolation

Transactional distance coupled with poor learner support results in feelings of isolation when learning at a distance. It is therefore not surprising that feelings of isolation were reported by all participants who were working in the outskirts of urban centres and those in remote villages who could not interact with other learners and local tutors. The major support that participants desired was to have local tutors. The distance learners in Botswana, Mauritius and Zambia had support from local tutors, but could not always meet due to work and other social commitments. However their isolation was not as extreme as the one experienced by distance learners in Lesotho and Malawi where local support was not available since the DE institutions in those countries had no money to pay local tutors. For example this is what two participants from Lesotho said which was echoed by other participants in both Lesotho and Malawi:

First participant: We were told to pay for tutors if we wanted the tutorial support.

Second participant: The lack of tutors disappointed me.

Inadequate learner support or lack of it caused stress to the distance learners hence they felt disappointed. When they enrolled for the programme, the expectation was that they would be supported by IGNOU and local tutors. The issue of finding money to pay for local tutorial support generated stress and emotional detachment from IGNOU. The participants also expected to be provided with learner support even in their villages. One participant working in a village expressed how he felt by saying:
There are social aspects which cannot be attended to while on the other hand trying to focus on the studies. If you are studying alone like me, it's very frustrating if you encounter some problems because no one is around to give you advice. You feel isolated and demoralised.

The issue of isolation is common in distance education but one would expect a Mega University like IGNOU with close to 3 million learners the world over to have in place an impeccable learner support system to meet the needs of its diverse learners. One would also expect distance education practitioners like the participants of this study to be very aware of the effects of poor learner support and take charge by being proactive and plan effectively to deal with such experiences in order to reduce frustrations that turn out to be stressful. In this regard, four participants who were positive shared their coping strategies by saying the following:

First participant: *The only solution that could help you to cope is to take some days from work and have enough rest, that's when you can do a bit of school work and do some research in the internet.*

Second participant: *I tell myself that there are some other learners out there who have it worse than me!*

Third participant: *One needs self-motivation. In a number of cases I think of the ultimate goal and this really encourages me to be resolute in my studies. But in the whole it is exciting as one really gets to appreciate what our learners are actually going through.*

Fourth participant: *Self dedication and discipline are important. I have the drive and want to see myself completing my studies come what may.*

The positive coping strategies for coping with stress related to learning at a distance revealed by the participants above included taking time off in order to cool off the stress and re-energise oneself to attend to studies in a more focused way, consoling oneself that there were learners in worse off situations, being self-motivated, being dedicated and exercising discipline. It appears that the distance learners who were positive were more likely to cope better than distance learners who had negative attitudes. Confidence, dedication and self-discipline appeared to have been the virtues that sustained distance learners in their studies.

**Discussion of findings**

The stressors namely; family issues, work pressure, financial issues, time constraints, delayed feedback and feelings of isolation as identified by distance learners in Southern Africa are not unique but are generally experienced by other people at the workplace.
(Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; de Jesus and Conboy, 2001; Trenberth and Dewe, 2002; Shaikar et al, 2004; Iwasaki et al 2005; McCormick et al, 2005; Jordaan, 2007; Klink et al 2008; Giancola et al, 2009). However, in the area of learning at a distance, these stressors have the potential to negatively affect academic performance and the desire for life-long learning.

About 33% of the distance learners who adopted maladaptive coping strategies tended not to be cooperative and often their paid work performance was affected negatively and their supervisors formally registered their displeasure. Yet about 66% of participants who made positive appraisals and employed adaptive coping strategies were more goal-focused and planned their activities better than those who made negative appraisals. What appears to explain the difference is the historical background of the distance learners in terms of educational and work experience. Distance learners who had a classroom teaching experience seemed to respond positively and to embrace personal development in coping with various stressors. Those with no previous classroom teaching experience adopted maladaptive approaches and in informal telephone discussions, blamed their stress challenges on institutional handling of their job profiles. They seized the opportunity to vent out issues that were not directly related to their distance learning but indirectly affected their academic performance. They failed to realize that institutional support in terms of financing their studies and study leave provision eventually benefited them in terms of becoming professionals in distance education. What also emerged was the lack of platforms for distance learners to interact through electronic means like learning management systems or e-mails to discuss academic issues and on sharing how they were affected by the different stressors and ways of handling and surviving their daily hassles as they negotiated through study, work and other commitments.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The typical stressors that adult distance learners encounter during the course of their studies include family issues, work pressure, financial issues, time constraints, delayed assignment feedback, and feelings of isolation. In the light of these stressors adult distance learners tend to cope by relying on multiple strategies such as physical exercising; focusing on individual study goals; taking days off/resting; taking study leave; implementing time management plans and drawing solace from the awareness that there are others in worse positions.

The implication of this study underpins the centrality of attraction and retention of ODL learners in ODL programmes. It is critical that the DE provider identifies possible stressors that can affect learners negatively and put in place strategies of minimising or avoiding the stressors. The training of DE personnel to be professional DE practitioners cannot be overemphasised as it contributes not only towards improved delivery of DE programmes, but also retention of learners. In southern Africa where
ODL learner support research contribution is minimal, the professional development of DE personnel can advance research and publication output. The reduction of stressors has the potential to make more DE practitioners improve their qualification and participate in research. This can facilitate the transformation of the education landscape in southern Africa and lead to new boundaries of sustainable ODL provision and scholarship. This can be achieved provided a wide range of support mechanisms to help learners cope with stress and complete their programmes with minimum stress are explored within the SADC regional context.

The other implication of this study relates to the fact that stressors faced by ODL practitioners engaged in learning at a distance have the potential to affect both academic and work performance, particularly for practitioners who study in isolation. Yet the uptake of electronic technology in reducing stress through interactive sessions with peers is a major opportunity for ODL practitioners who are expected to embrace the latest technologies. As a result, distance learners can benefit from online interactions to bridge the distance between learners and course facilitators. Not only will learners interact with content but also with peers and tutors.

A further recommendation is that ODL institutions should be encouraged to establish Wellness Offices which could constantly support ODL practitioners who are also distance learners through stress management training. A training programme on coping with stress should be mandatory for all ODL practitioners earmarked for further training in order to promote adaptive coping strategies as these are more likely to encourage learners to complete programmes within the stipulated period and avoid disengagement. Given the size of the sample that participated in this study, further research studies using larger samples, stress detecting questionnaires and stress scale measurements will be desirable.

References


Opening Doors to the ‘Less Privileged’ – The Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) Experience

T. Joyejob and S. Nundoo-Ghoorah
Division of Distance Education
Mauritius College of the Air, Reduit

Abstract

This paper highlights the results of a survey study that investigated the profile of typical Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) learner and contribution made by MCA in the provision of access to tertiary education by marginalised groups. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used and data was collected through a questionnaire and interview schedule from 102 randomly selected MCA distance learners and one female interviewee. The respondents were drawn from 6 undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Descriptive data analysis was mainly used, including frequency distribution tables, graphs and figures.

The results of this study indicate that there are more female enrollees than males at MCA, since three out of every four MCA learners are females. A significant number of MCA learners are mature working adults and a majority of these learners are from less privileged income groups. The survey also shows that women generally consider ODL to be compatible with motherhood and job constraints, while most respondents view MCA programmes as affording them a second chance. In addition, many of the respondents find the cost of MCA programmes affordable.

Introduction

Triggered by an initial curiosity about the differential profile of Mauritius College of the Air’s (MCA) open and distance learning (ODL) learners, this paper explores MCA’s contribution to making higher education accessible to adults in need of an alternative mode of learning. Since its establishment in 1971, democratising access to education through mass media has been the raison d’être of the Mauritius College of the Air. Over the years, ODL, as the ‘golden goose’ of the developing world (Perraton, 2000) has laid flexible methodologies for higher learning, ‘hatching’ benefits for adults seeking to learn differently at their convenience. The continuing appeal of MCA ODL methodology lies in its self-learning materials, which enable self-paced learning anywhere anytime.

The study reported in this article was based on two key research questions (1) who is the typical MCA learner? (2) what makes the ODL mode germane to this type of learner? One hundred and two (102) students across 6 disciplines were surveyed and a
telephone interview was carried out for further probing with one of these respondents. Significant patterns in learner demographics have emerged. Findings provide insight into the power of ODL to fight knowledge imperialism, create opportunity and bring about social justice.

**Conceptual Clarification**

ODL refers to practices that enable access to learning with no or minimum barriers with respect to age, gender or time constraints. Learning is delivered through print, audio-visual, and ICT-mediated self-learning reference materials to those separated by time and space from those who are teaching. Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) programmes are delivered mostly through print materials supported by weekly/fortnightly tutoring at learner-friendly times. The new generation of MCA programmes is offered through state of the art teleconferencing.

Open and distance learning (ODL), the so-called ‘golden goose of the developing world’ (Perraton, 2000), has presented MCA with a practical strategy to address the challenge of widening access at a lesser cost through economies of scale. It is a sustainable, flexible, convenient and cost-effective model capable of reaching working adults at their doorsteps.

The term ‘less privileged’ refers to individuals who have few or no opportunities to access higher education due to several challenges, including:

a) multiple socio-economic commitments,
b) mature age,
c) limited financial means, and
d) inadequate academic qualifications

Such non-traditional learners are unable to access conventional institutions and are threatened by ‘knowledge imperialism’ in an increasingly knowledge-driven world (ICDE, 2009). Such learners would be deprived of their right to higher education as stated in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This paper argues that the Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) opens the doors to tertiary education for such ‘marginalised’ individuals.

**Mauritius College of the Air**

Mauritius College of the Air (MCA), a parastatal non-profit institution, has a four-decade long history of democratising education. The MCA was set up, with help from the International Extension College in 1971, to promote education in the newly independent Mauritius through mass media and ‘correspondence courses’ (Dhurbarrylall, 1991). Back in 1972, in his inaugural speech, the first Prime Minister
of Mauritius spoke of the MCA’s role to ‘equalise educational facilities’ (Dodds, 1975). MCA attained the status of tertiary institution in 1998. Although distance learning activities were already in place as far back as 1998, the division of distance education was only set up in 1994, with the assistance of the Open University of UK.

Globalisation

Globalisation has increased the internationalisation of higher learning and provided the Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) with the capacity to widen access to higher education at a lesser cost. Through gradual participation in various forms of international collaborations, MCA has benefitted in several ways, including circumvent high costs of course development, reduce course fees, develop its staff, and increase the diversity of professional, undergraduate, and postgraduate programmes that cater for diverse market needs. These transnational initiatives comprise

- Course development (with UNISA),
- Consultancy (Open University, UK),
- Staff training for capacity building (e.g. Tele Universite de Quebec, University of London),
- Licensing of course materials (NEC, IGNOU),
- Funding of projects (IEC, UNICEF, World Bank), and
- Import of programmes.

Globalisation has also enabled home-based access to prestigious overseas universities and the import of reasonably-priced courses with self-learning materials from internationally acclaimed institutions. These partnerships have widened MCA’s panoply of undergraduate, postgraduate, and professional programmes, thereby enabling MCA to cater for the needs of more individuals employed in education, business and commerce, medical, and transport domains. The current MCA paradigm is to explore innovative ways of collaboration epitomised by interactive tele-learning programmes that are broadcast in real-time by overseas partner institutions. MCA is now venturing into another dimension of opening the doors of higher learning and bringing it closer to the ‘less privileged’.

Although funding and staff training provisions are diminishing at MCA, due to global financial crisis, programme provision continues to grow in breadth and scope through involvement in international partnerships. Table 1 below shows the growth in the number and range of partnerships, from three in 2000 to seven by 2010, while the number of programmes has correspondingly increased from 8 to 25 over the same period.
Table1: International Partnerships and programmes over the past decades

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 2000</th>
<th>Year 2010</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>International Partners</strong></td>
<td><strong>Programmes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute of Transport (UK)</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advanced Diploma</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chartered Institute of Marketing (UK)</td>
<td>CIM</td>
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<tr>
<td>IGNOU</td>
<td>DIM</td>
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<td>BCA</td>
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<td>BTS</td>
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<td>MBA</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University of Madras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amity University</td>
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Pan-African E-network

The Pan-African e-network is a fine illustration of international networking in higher education to reduce the “tertiary divide”. Initiated by former Indian president Abdul Kalam in 2009, it has provided the technological capacity to wire MCA and more than 12 other educational institutions across Africa for synchronous interactions, such as teleconferenced lectures from the University of Madras, IGNOU and Amity. The availability of archived lectures on the provider institutions websites makes this mode of delivery flexible and convenient for working adults.

Research Questions

Who is the typical MCA learner? Why does ODL appeal to this learner? Random perceptions have hitherto informed our views given the dearth of relevant statistical information on the MCA student population. This survey attempts to explore patterns in learner profiles.
Research Method

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to collect data. Collection instruments consisted of a questionnaire survey and telephone interview.

Undertaken in January 2011, the survey aimed at gathering demographic and socio-economic details such as age, gender, marital status, income, and reasons for opting for ODL among others. Learners following 6 programmes were distributed questionnaires when they attended their Saturday tutorials at our learning centre in Belle Rose SSS. All present filled in the questionnaire. The following programmes ranging from diploma to master’s level were selected on the basis of representativeness in terms of academic level and discipline:

- Diploma in Library and Information Science
- BA English
- BSc Management
- Postgraduate Diploma in Human Resource Management
- Master’s in Business Administration
- MA English.

Data gathered during the survey inspired us to probe deeper into certain trails. A telephone interview was carried out with one female respondent from the 102 previously surveyed. She was selected on account of (a) gender (b) mature age (c) lack of conventional formal qualifications, and (d) limited financial means. A structured approach that was preferred covered several key prompts, including (a) access problems (b) learning motivations and (c) appropriateness of ODL. She will be referred to as Aastha for confidentiality reasons.

Findings

Findings point at 5 interesting elements in the profile of those surveyed:

- Gender-wise, the composition of the research sample shows that Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) attracts more females (73.5%) than males
- The distribution by age suggests that there are slightly more mature learners (51%) who are aged above 35 years
- A typical MCA learner is employed, since 98 (96%) of the 102 respondents reported that they were working
- A majority (67.6%) of learners earn a salary of less than Rs20 000 per month
- Most learners have high entry qualifications, except for 10% that does not have A-levels.
Our findings indicate that ODL has played a key role in opening access to higher education and empowering women, mature learners, the economically-disadvantaged and the ‘qualifications-challenged’. Following analysis of each of these profile elements, the case of Aastha, who embodies all these, will be discussed.

**Empowering Women**

Women learners considerably outnumbered their male counterparts; nearly three-quarters (73.5%) of the sample comprised female learners. The chart below shows the number of male and female learners tally out of 102.

![Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by gender](image)

Interestingly, 86.8% of them said they opted for ODL on account of its flexibility. 68% of these women are married and out of these 88% have children. Moreover, in the open-ended section of the questionnaire some stated how the ODL mode provided space for learning whilst juggling multiple household, childcare and professional commitments. It provides ‘flexible time management possibilities while preventing classroom attendance’. This is in line with worldwide studies on the potential of ODL to widen access to higher learning for women. Qureshi (2002, cited in Kwapong 2007) postulates that this mode of learning ‘attracts more married women than on campus forms’ and rightly argues that ODL helps women circumvent ‘constraints of time, space, resources and socio-economic disabilities.’

A comparison of female enrolment rate at undergraduate level with that at postgraduate level reveals that there were nearly four times as many women in enrolled on undergraduate (79%) than postgraduate programmes (21%). This is illustrated in Figure 2 below.
The greater participation of women in undergraduate studies appears to be a global trend, as attested by Pryzmuś (2004, cited in Kwapong 2007), who asserts that women are more likely than men to interrupt formal studies for parenthood. As a result many women are easily constrained by their diverse parental, household, and work obligations that ODL is their ‘first chance’ to university education (Reuss, 1994, cited in Kwapong 2007). It is speculated that after undergraduate studies they take another break to attend to their multiple duties. There is a need for further research in this area.

Empowering Mature Learners

More than half (51%) of those surveyed are aged over 35, 10% are above 50, while 96% of the sample comprises working learners. ODL literature abounds on the appropriateness of this mode for adult learners (Knowles 1990 cited in Kwapong, 2007). This is also confirmed by the current study which shows that 68.6% of the learners said they opted for ODL due to its flexibility. ODL self-learning materials enable busy adults to study at their convenience and pace. Moreover, tutorial timings at Mauritius College of the Air (MCA), which take place on Saturdays and/or weekdays and after normal working hours, make learning ‘permissible’ in the time-deprived hectic life of mature adults. ODL provides such individuals an environment conducive for learning using andragogical strategies that are appropriate for the learning style of adults (Knowles 1990, cited in Thomas & Soares, 2009).
Nearly half (46%) of the respondents stated ‘other commitments’ as reasons for late entry to higher education. It is surmised that financial constraints could have been a deterrent. According to Thomas and Soares (2009), there seems to be modest correlation between mature age of learners and low socio-economic status. The humble economic background of our learners will be discussed in the ensuing section.

**Empowering the Economically-disadvantaged**

Cost is frequently adduced as a factor that inhibits less well-off learners from pursuing higher education, leading to disparity of opportunity among social classes (Thomas & Soares 2009). ODL reduces the cost of learning and debunks the ‘exclusivity’ of higher education (ICDE, 2009). This is supported by the current study, which shows that 49% of the respondents indicated that they would not have been able to afford another programme. Cost, it would seem, is an important push factor as evidenced in another recent Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) survey, on those enrolling on Amity programmes, which showed that 43% admitted cost affordability as a prime attraction.

Interestingly our survey revealed that 67.6% of the respondents earn less than Rs20 000 monthly – an amount close to the current non-taxable income group (Rs19 700) decreed by the Mauritius Revenue Authority. At the same time, 42% of the respondents earn less than Rs15 000. The following table shows the income profile of the learners surveyed.

**Table 2: Income group of learners surveyed (N=102)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income group</th>
<th>Undergraduate/Diploma Programmes</th>
<th>Postgraduate Programmes</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>less than 15 000</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 000-20 000</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 000-30 000</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 000-40 000</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>above 40 000</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>80</td>
<td>78.4</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It would seem that diploma/undergraduate learners earn less than postgraduate ones, since only 18 (22.5%) of the 80 undergraduate learners earn above Rs21 000 compared with 50% of postgraduate learners who earn as much. This suggests that there is a relationship between earnings and educational qualifications. Another interesting fact is that only a minority earn more than Rs40 000. These economic characteristics
suggest that MCA learners have a rather modest financial profile. MCA’s non-profit orientation and ODL mandate are ‘inclusionary’ factors that enable the import of affordable programmes from prestigious overseas partners.

**Empowering the Qualifications-challenged**

Of the 102 respondents, only 10% did not have A-levels. They were able to access Diploma programmes and BSc Management through alternative qualifications and/or recognition of work experience. These alternative routes, including the MCA-designed Certificate in Librarianship and Information Science and the Diploma in Management, aim “to bridge” the A-levels gap. These access routes have created opportunities for those debarred entry to higher learning, giving them a chance to improve their socio-economic status. Aastha’s story will exemplify this further.

**Aastha**

Our 44-year old telephone interviewee, Aastha, was considered in this study as the voice of the less-privileged learners who are empowered through ODL. Aastha comes from a low-income rural background. She left school after her O-levels, got married at the age of 19 and gave birth to three children. She accessed MCA’s Diploma in Management programme on account of her work experience in the pre-primary sector. On completion of her diploma she was given a salary increment. She is now in her first year of BSc Management, jointly offered by the MCA and the University of Technology, Mauritius.

ODL has enabled her to climb up two rungs of the tertiary ladder and increase her ‘self-esteem’. Her socio-economic status has improved. She is now juggling family and work responsibilities whilst coping with undergraduate studies and looking after her seriously ill husband. Aastha says she would not have been able to afford higher education without the MCA.

**Conclusion**

The survey has produced a rich yield of data and paved the way for further research on a number of issues. Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) has opened the doors of higher learning for the less privileged in terms of gender-based socio-economic burden, mature age, modest financial means and lack of formal qualifications. The conclusion of this study are aligned to Pityana’s (cited in ICDE 2009) observation that ‘perhaps what we as ODL practitioners acknowledge and what we quietly celebrate, is that the growth of ODL is testament to the demise of exclusivity in higher education provision’. Nevertheless, study also shows that more domains of flexible learning/teaching remain to be explored to create still more opportunities. Decision-makers must lift constitutional, financial, and technological barriers to empower Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) to exploit further ODL possibilities.
References


