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Teaching challenges in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Africa: A critical analysis of the transition from conventional teaching to ODL teaching

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Abstract

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has grown in leaps and bounds ensuring that education is no longer confined to the brick and mortar edifices of college and university buildings. The ubiquitous spread of ODL in Africa has paused challenges with regards to teaching. As ODL teaching staff have emerged from conventional institutions to teach in a completely different ODL environment while ODL institutions themselves have not been issuing ODL qualifications to address the skills gap. The paper explores the skills gaps that exist in ODL teaching in Africa. It highlights the teaching demands that make ODL teaching unique from conventional education teaching. The paper underscores the need for training in ODL teaching to address the ODL teaching challenges in Africa.

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Introduction

Distance education has come into distinction during the last early to mid nineties in Africa. The need for lifelong and continuous learning and the ubiquitous spread of multimedia communication technologies have pushed distance education approaches to the forefront of educational practice. Distance education is growing in leaps and bounds such that those who are responsible for course delivery (the teachers/instructors) are often overwhelmed. This is more so for the distance teacher in higher education. Distance instructors in Africa are increasingly being called upon to deliver courses with an alien delivery system in order to meet the needs of distance education. The normative approach of the ill-prepared teacher is to teach courses as they would be taught in the conventional classroom. Suffice to say, the distance learning environment is unlike the traditional classroom and this calls upon the application of unique strategies to enhance effective teaching. The major challenge has been that ODL teaching staff have emerged from conventional institutions to teach in a completely different ODL environment hence the skills gap.

Unraveling the Concept of Distance Education.

Distance learning is used as a term to describe the student-centeredness of distance education and it utilises print and new multimedia communication technologies to present individual lessons to learners at a distance. While distance teaching refers to the didactic strategies of delivering instructions to students, and this is teacher-centered. Correspondence study entails distance education through the postal sub-groups. That is, learning at home and communicating with teachers using the print resources as primary elements of distance education. (Keegan, 1996:32-34). Holmberg (1990:21) defined distance education as:

The various forms of teaching and learning at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or in the same premises but which nevertheless benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition (i.e. tutoring, teaching) of the staff of the tutorial organisation.

The main characteristic of Distance education is that it relies on noncontiguous communication between the educator and the distant student. Put simply,

distance education refers to the delivery of useful learning opportunities at convenient places and times for learners who are usually adults, irrespective of the institution providing the learning opportunity (Kaufman, Watkins & Guerra, 2001:19-26).

Distance education has four key features which are: institutional certification where learning is licensed by an institution; the use of diversity of media especially multimedia technologies for instructional delivery; provision of two-way communication to ensure the interaction of the teacher with the learner, and the learner to learner interaction; and the possibility of face-to-face meetings for tutorials for teacher-student interaction as well as student-student interaction and laboratory or practice session or library study.

How Distance Education has Revolutionised Teaching.

Distance education has changed teaching and the role of the teacher from a disseminator of information to a facilitator of learning. Thus there is a need for professional development to equip and prepare the distance teacher for teaching in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) environment. There is no doubt that the role of the teacher has evolved since the emergence of ODL. In ODL the teacher is no longer the “dispenser of information”, especially in the wake of increased access to resources optimised by the internet. This has certainly transformed the role of the teacher. Sellers (2001:28-32) noted that the conventional classroom teacher served as the initiator of all classroom activities, and as such, the educator was responsible for students' learning opportunities. ODL is ultimately student centered and student-driven. The ODL environment encourages student-centered learning in which intellectual acquisition replaces the didactic force of the teacher as the main impetus of learning.

The most critical issue in this educational revolution is the role of the teacher. The distance instructor loses a certain autonomy common in the traditional classroom. In distance education, the teacher becomes a member of a team, thus the teacher no longer has total control of the learning environment. In conventional education teachers have managed classes by virtue of their control on information. Despite the availability of information on the internet and other published resources because of their youthful age and the nature of conventional study involving face to face daily lectures and limited prior learning experience, the teacher still retains much of that information control as students remain largely dependent on the teacher for information. In distance

education the student has wide access to easy to read instructional materials such as modules which they access as soon as they commence their studies in addition the prior learning experiences of the mature student ensure that the student has a lot of sources to draw information from apart from the teacher. The distant student is better able to afford the e-resources compared to conventional students since most students work, limiting their dependence on the teacher for knowledge. This is especially true in the African context where accessing the internet is a challenge owing to the digital divide. Muirhead (2001:15) suggests that distance education demands changing the traditional role of teachers from information transmitters to guides who arrange meaningful learner-centered experiences.

The question emerges as to whether an inert learning package is sufficient as a teaching tool, despite how well written it maybe, can it be a substitute for real sustained communication with the teacher as both content and learning expert?. The role of the teacher is largely simulated by way of written instructions and commentary in ODL as opposed to the face to face interaction. It is also interesting to note that there is a qualitative difference between written communication (in the form of instructional material) and verbal discourse when guiding students. These are the aspects that distance education brings into teaching, the teacher should be mindful of these in order for the teacher to take such issues into account especially if a transition is being made from conventional teaching to distance teaching as is often the case in the African ODL environment.

Multiple studies suggest that the constructivist model of teaching works best for the ODL environment. Since ODL relies on new technologies, education scholars have often suggested that an effective way to integrate technology into the teaching and learning process is to follow a constructivist model. Constructivist instruction requires learners to use their knowledge to solve problems that are meaningful and realistically complex drawing on their past experiences. The problems provide the context for the students to apply their knowledge and to take ownership of their learning. (Tam, 2000:50-54) The teacher's role becomes one of a facilitator in a constructivist model. Instead of telling students the answer, the teacher asks questions to help them discover the answer themselves. For this type of teaching to be successful, teachers need to give students time to explore the material and construct meaning from the experience. It is such teaching approaches which separate distance teaching from conventional teaching. The assumptions that the roles

of the teacher as well as those of the students change in distance education is largely accepted. (Sellers, 2001:31-33) This is largely so because integrating student experiences with technology as is usually the case with ODL results in the role of the teacher changing. The teacher no longer has to be in charge, but gives some of the control over to the students and the technology. The task for the distance teacher is to organize the learning environment in ways that allow students to use their own knowledge to construct meaning of a particular problem. A learning environment is created in which students have a more active role in the learning process.

Distance Education and the Emergence of the Distance Teacher in Africa

Distance education as we know it today began with what Moore called the third generation of Distance Education around the 1960s and early 1970s. This was a time of critical change in distance education, resulting from several experiments with new ways of organizing technology and human resources, leading to new instructional techniques and new educational theorizing at a global level. (Moore and Kearsley, 2005:19-21) Technology progressed along with distance education. By the 1970's, it had achieved broad acceptance in the western world and in the 1980s, it "arrived" as one of the "flavors of the decade" in education, in higher education especially. (Moore and Anderson, 2003:44-45) Garrison and Shale (1987:5-8) recognized the move into an Information Age characterized by multimedia technologies capable of interactive and individualized education which enhanced distance education.

In Africa distance education emerged out of the increased demand for higher education after it was discovered that most of the conventional universities could no longer cope with the demand for higher education, a few years after the attainment of independence. Failure to cope with demand could be interpreted in a number of ways; failing to cope because of the increased number of African citizens demanding higher education especially university education despite the establishment of additional conventional universities; there was the need for higher education which would allow those citizens who wanted to learn and advance themselves to do so whilst they worked and earned an income for themselves and their families; there was demand from those citizens who had been deprived by the colonial bottle neck educational system to access higher education and in addition there was the demand for a higher education system that would allow citizens who could not meet the high entry requirements of the conventional universities and

colleges to have access to higher education through distance education.

The commencement of ODL in Africa varies from country to country. However, most countries established distance education after the attainment of independence with the exception of a few countries like South Africa (UNISA) which had distance education way before the attainment of independence. Prior to the attainment of independence most countries like Zimbabwe only had foreign correspondence colleges like the "Rapid Results College" offering some form of distance education through correspondence education. Before independence there was no government established distance education in countries like Zimbabwe. In Zimbabwe ODL grew out of the conventional university system in the early 1990s from the University of Zimbabwe formerly University of Rhodesia. The ODL centre was called the "Centre for Distance Education" and it was established in 1993. The teaching staff emerged from the University of Zimbabwe a conventional university to teach in the newly established distance education centre which was later to be transformed into the Zimbabwe Open University in 1999 following an Act of Parliament and it remains the only exclusive distance education university in Zimbabwe.

The Zimbabwean distant teacher/instructor story is typical of most African distance teachers who emerged from conventional teaching to teaching in a completely different ODL environment. These are the questions which quickly come to mind, what challenges does such transition pose? What skills are required of a teacher in an ODL environment? What skills gaps exist (if any)? And how may those gaps be filled? There are no easy answers to these questions, however they give an insight into the challenges that confront ODL teachers as they make transitions from conventional teaching to distance teaching more so in resource constrained distance teaching environments of Africa.

The Skills Requirements for the Distance Teacher: *Where does the African Teacher Stand?*

According to Sherry (1995:337-365) conventional education allows teachers to interact directly with their students. In contrast, distance learning teachers are not in direct classroom contact with their students. The distance-learning teacher is the common thread throughout the distance learning process. The distance teacher like the conventional teacher must be grounded in the relevant subject area but must have the added responsibility of receiving training in effective distance education strategies.

Thus the distance teacher cannot afford to remain insular and straitjacketed in the vain and misguided hope that teaching approaches adopted in conventional classroom teaching maybe adopted without modifications into the distance education environment.

Multimedia technologies are increasingly becoming the backbone of ODL. For most of the 20th century, distance education involved pen and paper, the typewriter, and the postal service, which provided the sole link between the individual teacher and the individual student. With the development of the internet and computer technologies, it is possible to transmit educational courses, programs and content more widely using these mass media distribution channels (Moore and Anderson, 2003:21-25). The pervasiveness of multimedia technologies has brought a whole new perspective to distance teaching, making it imperative for distance educators to be techno savvy. Despite the fact that the digital divide has been hampering the full utilisation of multimedia technologies in Africa and most of the developing world, multimedia technologies are being used in Africa to keep in touch with international students and the launch of virtual regions by most ODL institutions bears witness to the need for ICT skills by the distant teacher. Most distance teachers lack the sufficient ICT skills that the modern day distance teaching demands. Whilst manual means of course delivery were sufficient in the years gone by and might still suffice even in the conventional classroom (even though traditional classrooms are now going digital for example the use of power point presentations in instructional delivery) the same can no longer be said of distance teaching. Distance teachers in Africa need to acquire the ICT skills necessary for them to perform their teaching roles in an ODL environment for them to remain relevant in a technological ODL environment that threatens to bypass them thereby making them ineffective.

Another area that affects the change of the role of the instructor in distance education is the “Transactional Distance” Gap as espoused by Moore. This concept of “transactional distance” defined the relationship of teacher and learner (Moore and Anderson, 2003:30-32). According to Moore, transactional distance is the gap of understanding and communication between the teachers and learners caused by geographic distance. It is filling this ‘gap’ of understanding and communication between the teacher and student that defines the role of the instructor. This requires the teacher to be skilled in distance communication for effective teaching to take place. Naturally this calls upon the former traditional teacher to be skilled in

intercultural communication in order to be able to communicate effectively with a diverse group of students found in the ODL environment which includes international students. The instructor must be the one to bridge that gap through special teaching techniques, distinctive procedures in instructional design, the facilitation of interaction and an awareness of intercultural communication skills. (Moore and Kearsley, 2005:17-19). The African distance teacher largely lacks these special teaching techniques and expertise in intercultural communication because of their conventional teaching backgrounds.

Beaudoin (1990:21) suggested that teachers accustomed to more conventional teaching modes will have to acquire new skills to assume expanded roles not only to teach distance learners, but also to organize instructional resources suitable in content and format for independent study. This explicitly expresses the need for module writing skills which are part and parcel of ODL instruction materials. The ODL teacher coming from a conventional background naturally lacks such skills, therefore there is a skills gap. In addition, because most students in distance education are adults, they have many social challenges which have to be taken into account by the distance teacher. This entails expanding the role of the distance teacher to that of a distance teacher cum counselor. The distance teacher must be able to provide basic counseling and motivate students to overcome their social problems. Another expanded role of the distance educator includes the ability to accommodate mature student experience in the ODL environment. Whereas the tendency in conventional teaching is on disseminating information to students, distance teaching skills place importance on allowing students to share their experiences which they would have acquired throughout their working experience and prior learning. This is a fundamental teaching strategy which has to be acquired by distance teachers in Africa if the adult ODL student is to fully benefit from the ODL environment. Thus the ODL student’s creativity should not be stifled as students have a lot to share and any teaching approaches should cater for such innovations for distance teaching to be effective. There is also a misplaced tendency by the inexperienced distance teachers coming from the conventional teaching background to focus on the delivery style that is the modules and the technology. Distance teaching skills require that the teacher humanize the courses by focusing on the students and not the delivery style.

Addressing the Distance Teacher Skills Gap Quagmire in Africa

The usual instinctive approach taken by distance teachers as they come into distance teaching shows teachers having the desire to cling to more traditional teaching approaches but finding these methods not as effective and teachers feeling the need for training for distance education teaching. To address this skills gap education departments of higher institutions of learning need to update their teaching methods courses to include methods of teaching at a distance. The question then is who is to train our future teachers in the area of distance education? Institutions of higher education especially ODL institutions must address this question.

It is evident that successful distance teachers require a unique set of skills. A good conventional teacher is not necessarily a good distance teacher (Davis and Roblyer, 2005:11). For distance education to be successful, distance teachers need to be trained in the technology as well as the pedagogy of distance learning. Distance teaching is a new experience, different from teaching in the conventional classroom. It requires a different set of skills and a different pedagogy. Training for teaching via distance education is essential (Wolf, 2004:5-7).

It should be noted that the use of multimedia in teaching cannot ensure effective teaching in ODL but the way they are integrated is what is important. Therefore the use of a "media mix", that is, printed materials, electronic media, interactive and non-interactive media are critical. There is the need for the appropriate mix of "low-tech" delivery approaches using the print media and technology based delivery systems in distance teaching. It should be noted that no technology regardless of its interactivity can be a substitute for human interaction. Thus, the use of regional study centres for face-to-face communication where appropriate is important in enabling ODL teaching. This will allow for teacher to student and student to student interaction which can greatly enhance the delivery of distance teaching (Willis, 1998:57-59).

Perhaps the question to ask is can we teach an old dogs new tricks? Perhaps the tricks are not new but just altered or revamped to suit another environment. We do not have to re-invent the wheel to train the teacher to teach at a distance; just re-structure the wheel. This implies that the onus is upon ODL institutions to develop education programmes that train teachers in the teaching dynamics involved in distance education and these will be premised on the theoretical base of conventional teaching education.

There is therefore a need to develop teaching curriculums in distance education to address the skills gaps in distance teaching in Africa. That is a long term goal, in the interim it is necessary to offer workshops and skills training programmes to practicing teachers in order to equip them with the necessary ICT, intercultural communication, counseling and instructional material development skills that are necessary for effective teaching in distance education.

Conclusion

The technological means of communication and information used in ODL makes teaching more complex and this necessitates for the segmentation of the act of teaching into multiple tasks. The teacher's functions become part of a process of planning and execution divided in space and time: The tasks of selecting, organizing and transmitting knowledge, undertaken in conventional teaching, match those of the ODL environment in terms of the preparation of courses and texts that constitute the basis of pedagogical materials presented in diversified multimedia supports systems such as audio, video and print formats. In distance education the task of orientation and guidance of the learning process is no longer exercised through personal and collective contact in the classroom as in conventional teaching, but in ODL teaching activities are mediated through several accessible resources. The aspect of the physical distance between the teacher and student, the use of multimedia technologies and the unique characteristics of the adult distant student all interact to place new skills demands on the distance teacher. In order for distance teaching to be effective in Africa there is need to develop ODL teaching qualifications that fully prepare the distance teacher to teach at a distance and address the current skills gaps that currently exist.

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