

Challenges Faced by Adult Learners Enrolled in Blended Distance Learning Programmes: A Case Study of the Institute of Adult Education

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***Abstract:** This research attempted to provide an insight into major barriers facing adult learners pursuing a diploma in adult and continuing education programme through Blended Distance Learning. Participants included the adult learners, staff from the Department of Open and Distance Learning who are also the facilitators of the programme. This study was conducted as a descriptive case study of the barriers and difficulties faced by adult learners seeking an alternative route to education. Data were collected in the form of interviews, email correspondences, and documents from participants - both learners and facilitators. The findings of the study show that, most of the learners pursuing this programme did not have computers and internet access. Secondly, participants had limited ICT knowledge. Thirdly, most of them didn't have study skills and fourthly, these adult learners had competing priorities and struggled balancing family responsibilities, job obligations, and commitment to the programme. It was recommended that, the Institute of Adult Education should introduce capacity building programmes such as provision of short ICT courses concerning for both facilitators and adult learners, improving ICT infrastructures as well as introducing resource centers at the head-quarters and all regional centres.*

Keywords: Adult learners, distance learning, blended distance learning, education technology, case study.

INTRODUCTION

Online distance education has become increasingly more common in higher education. As institutions are moving into this learning environment creating more online courses and degree options, the primary consumer of these courses is the adult learners, those learners outside the 18-24 age groups (Benson, 2003). Online courses and degree programmes have created incredible opportunities for adult learners to participate in an online distance education (Bollag and Overland, 2001; Warschauer, 2003). Online courses have made it possible for the working adult to return to school. This is particularly important for primary and secondary school teachers working in the education field who need continuing education in order to improve their knowledge and teaching skills. Online distance education also offers an option for teachers who need or

would like to add additional credentials to their existing work. There are also some challenges despite the great opportunity of online distance education. For the adult learners, it is important to understand the challenges and barriers as well as the opportunities when participating in an online distance education course or programme. Adult learners have unique learning needs that need to be addressed in the online learning environment.

This paper is organized into five major sections. Section one introduces this study; section two covers adult learning theories; section three discusses the methodology used for the study; section four is about the findings and discussion; and section five deals with conclusion and recommendations.

ADULT LEARNING THEORIES

Although Malcolm Knowles is considered to be the authority on andragogy - which is also known as adult learning theory, Eduard Lindeman was considered a major philosopher of adult education in the United States during the early 1900s (Stewart, 1987). Brookfield (1987:122).) notes that according to Lindeman, adult education is “a cooperative venture in non-authoritarian, informal learning - the chief purpose of which is to discover the meaning of experience.” Lindeman advocated for the use of adult learning groups, and believed that the adult learner should be offered an opportunity to learn in small groups and that lectures should be eliminated (Brookfield, 1987).

Lindeman’s methods of adult education stressed the importance of discussion. He believed that the curriculum should focus on the competence instead of content. He wrote that adult learners should have a set of analytical skills developed through discussion groups, that could be applied to understand a range of different situation (Brookfield, 1987). He also believed that adults need to learn how to learn.

In 1920, Lindeman wrote about andragogy with Martha Anderson and together they stated that andragogy was “the true method of adult learning” (as cited in Brookfield, 1987:127). This was to become one of the most important concepts in the field of adult education (Brookfield, *op. cit.*).

Andragogy, which was first introduced by a German grammar teacher Alexander Kapp, was used to help illustrate Plato’s educational theory (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson 1998). Later, in 1921, the concept of andragogy surfaced again when Eugen Rosenstock, a German social scientist claimed that: “adult education required special teachers, special methods, and a special philosophy” (Knowles Holton, & Swanson, 1998:59). In 1968, Malcolm Knowles heard about andragogy and began using that term (Brookfield, 1987). Knowles has since become known as the principle expert on andragogy.

Malcolm Knowles’s theory of andragogy outlines effective methodologies for adult learning. Andragogy includes ideas such as an adult’s readiness to learn, the role of the learner’s experiences, the faculty member as a facilitator of learning, an adult’s orientation to learning, and the learner’s self concept (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). Andragogy is based on six basic principles or assumptions about the

characteristics of adult learners that are different from the assumptions about the learning of a young child. First, adult learners are self-directed rather than dependent. Secondly, adults have life experiences that are resources for learning. Thirdly, as adults mature, their readiness to learn is oriented to the developmental tasks of their social roles. Fourthly, adults are problem centered in their orientation to learning. Fifthly, an adult's perception of learning changes from a postponed application of knowledge to an immediate application. Sixthly, an adult's motivation to learn is internal (Knowles, 1984; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; Knowles & Knowles, 1972).

With a traditional pedagogical curriculum model, it is assumed that a student will simply learn what he or she is told (Posner, 2004). This is not the case with adult learners. Adult learners need to know why they should learn something. However, adults are accustomed to understanding what they do in life (Knowles, 1984; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998). Adults want to know the reason for learning something or how it will benefit them.

The distinction Knowles (1975) made between how adults and children learn was an important landmark in teaching and learning practices in vocational education and training, as well as in higher education. Andragogy, and the principles of adult learning that were derived from it, transformed face-to-face teaching (Brookfield, 1987; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998) and provided a rationale for distance education based on the notion of self-directedness (Knowles, 1980, 1984, 1989).

Most of the teachers who are teaching in Folk Development Colleges in Tanzania are from four leavers and they don't have enough qualifications for facilitating college level education. Therefore, the diploma in adult and continuing education equip them with knowledge and skills of how to help adult learners to learn in a clear, helpful and friendly manner.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted at the Institute of Adult Education in Dar es Salaam Region. It was mainly qualitative although elements of quantitative methodology were also employed. Different categories of respondents were used in order to provide extensive and comprehensive information about the problem being investigated. Forty respondents were involved including 10 course facilitators and 30 learners of the selected Focal Development Colleges from IAE in Dar es Salaam. Random sampling technique was used to select both facilitators and learners.

The method of collecting data included in-depth interviews, email correspondences and documentary analysis. While in-depth interviews enabled the researchers to probe on salient issues, documentary reviews provided the opportunity to check and verify issues emerging from in-depth interviews.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This part presents the findings of the study and their analysis. The findings were categorized and organized into four themes; communication, technology, social

inclusion and family responsibility.

COMMUNICATION

This section sought to assess how communication between distance learning participants, facilitators and programme coordinator has taken place during the learning process. Through interview, it was revealed that, a learner enrolled in blended distance learning course or programme will find that the driving force of learning will be textbased. The exchange of information between and among distance learning participants was primarily textual. Text based communication in distance learning had limitations. Text-based communication lacked mechanisms for making social differentiation. Social and physical cue do not necessarily show up in written speech. Gestures, voice intonation and facial expressions are lost in a text-based communication.

With the exception of a few who preferred to make telephone inquiries, email correspondence was almost exclusively the medium of communication among participants in the online distance education programme. This was evidenced by the huge amount of email data collected from the respondents. Over 300 exchanges took place between participants and programme coordinators during the first semester of the academic year 2011/2013. After the initial technology orientation the exchanges was over 600. Some of the problems encountered by learners include the following:

“My assignment froze up and I cannot open it to retake it.

I am having a problem opening the assignment again. Could you please resend.....

Help me I cannot find your module material posted.....

I can't find my assignment”

“Madam am very sorry, I was not able to submit the assignment on time, because I forgot to save.....so the text disappeared.....”

It became apparent that the adult learners required immediate feedback when asking a question or sending an assignment. If feedback was not received within 24 to 48 hours of the initial inquiry, learners became anxious and concerned about their level of success in the programme. These worries were then relayed to the coordinator who would help to ease some of their difficulties. Some answers to student inquires could not be addressed via email or even a telephone call. One of them remarked as follows:

“Most of the times when I need to speak with my module facilitator, I find it difficult because they seem to be busy..... and promise to call me back, the thing which never happened”

Contrary to the above, another learner put it plainly that:

“Our facilitators are very helpful to us, the problem is that, most of us have insufficient technological skills in the use of computer which sometimes delay the communication between us and them.”

Most of the adult learners participants expressed anxiety about delayed or getting no replies when assignments were sent via email attachments. This online distance learning programme required most of the communication to be textual. This was not a synchronous exchange and the initiator of the inquiry was required to wait for a response. Meanwhile, the learners's question remained unanswered thus negatively affecting the learning process. When the adult learner participants were asked about which programme areas needed frequent improvement they said that: "*We need quick feedback on emails.*"

It is important for all participants to understand the importance of immediacy of response when corresponding through an asynchronous media such as email. When face to face contact is limited, other means of synchronous communication need to be incorporated into the online environment. This may be accomplished through "chat" features which are built into the CMS interface.

TECHNOLOGY

A learner enrolled in blended distance learning programme is expected to have some basic ICT literacy skills. Distance learning appeals to the older adult learner because there is the convenience of completing course work anytime and anywhere, and accommodating individual family and career responsibilities. Most of our distance learners are not a generation of digital learning technology. This was due to the fact that technological skills were not necessary in their lives. From this study, it was noted that learners pursuing a diploma in adult and continuing education received a two day face to face technology orientation in their second semester. Most of them suggested that more thorough and in-depth technology skills training were needed. The training was reactionary in that it addressed specific problems that the participants had encountered during the previous semester. Some of the facilitators were good in using emails and telephone correspondence but did not have sufficient baseline technology skills to conduct class online such as skype.

Without basic technology skills and minimum computer system requirements, these adult learners lose sight of the educational goals of the programme. Instead, they become burdened with technological jargon and maneuvering within the online course management system (CMS). There can be a sense of insecurity when sending an email with an assignment attached. These issues need to be addressed early in the online distance learning experience. Orienting the digital converts to the online format, the CMS tools, and the protocols needs to be inclusive of institution and students. This technology orientation should be delivered in a face-to-face environment with time for practical application and experimentation.

Regardless whether the online distance education participants were experts or beginners in basic technology skills, the most significant area of frustration within the category of technology was the actual system requirements needed to navigate and participate in online distance learning programme. The World Wide Web is media rich which can be integrated into text based online learning environments enhancing the curriculum when face-to-face contact is limited. Comfortably accessing the media available on the

internet requires a broadband or high-speed internet connection. Several adult learners did not have high-speed internet when they started the programme. When downloading academic materials from their facilitators took several hours over a dial up connection, it became apparent that successful and timely completion of the programme would require subscribing to a high-speed Internet service. Three adult learners shared that: “*We lived in rural areas and we don’t have high speed internet service available.*”

Lack of high speed internet service available put the burden on them to complete the majority of their online course work at their places of employment creating yet another set of challenges. All of the adult learners were tutors and therefore worked in colleges. Internet connection speed was not the only system requirement needed for successful adult learning. In order for digital documents to be exchanged between and among adult learners, each user’s computer needed to have compatible software for their successfully blended distance learning.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides insight into analyzing and identifying critical barriers for adult learners pursuing a diploma in adult and continuing education programme through blended distance learning. Its key findings point to a need for clear common programme goals and instructional design that takes into consideration the special needs of the adult learners pursuing blended distance learning programme. Future research capacity in blended distance learning, including serious attempts to digitize and disseminate research, are needed. Government and higher institutions organizations should develop concrete strategies to improve adult learners’ knowledge in the use of technology.

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