MANAGEMENT, CHALLENGES AND EXPECTATIONS FOR EXPANDING ACCESS TO ONLINE ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMME

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Abstract

This study explored from an administrative perspective factors that posed challenges to adult learners and their expectations for expanding access to adult online education programme. Two Foci group discussions were to uncover feelings, attitudes, motivation, insights and perceptions about expectations and challenges potential adult learners faced in online learning. Two different groups were used for the discussion. Each group consisted of eight individuals and each discussion lasted for 90 minutes. A need for training in basic knowledge in computing for prospective adult learners was identified. Further, it was noted that, the adult learner must be taught to do online learning; to navigate through the online interface and on how to access learning materials online, complete assignments and participate in discussion forums using means that are motivating and involve simple instructions. It was suggested, administrators and academic leaders use this knowledge to address learners' expectations and help shape success in online education.

Keywords: E-learning, Adult learners, Administrators perspectives, Online interface

INTRODUCTION

Although distance education has enormous potential, it should not be regarded as having universal remedy for all educational problems (Rose, 1995). According to Rose, distance education has demonstrated that it possesses the potential for educating groups of people who, otherwise, would probably not attend higher education, however, the subject of access and accompanying instructional strategies requires greater exploration.

Hacker (2005), suggest that some key areas needing research and more extensive study include: learner recruitment and orientation; professional development; and, most importantly, methods for providing feedback and support for online learners. According to Hacker, the greatest challenge, authors have discovered is, figuring out how to provide appropriate feedback to learners about their performance and creating ways to keep distance learners motivated enough to persist at the learning tasks. Hacker, (2005) observe that, continued contact even for contacts established online (i.e. even electronic contact) with a human teacher is an essential component for most adult basic learners.

Other researchers have suggested that continuous, not dichotomous, change in the technologies of literacy and learning defines the Internet. They have argued that a dual-level theory of New Literacies is a productive way to conceptualize this continuous change, especially for education. They described uppercase (New Literacies) and lowercase (new literacies) theories, using the new literacies of online reading comprehension to illustrate the process. They suggest this approach is likely to lead to greater equity, understanding, and acceptance of continuously new technologies within educational systems (Leu, O'Byrne, Zawilinski, McVerry, & Everett-Cacopardo, 2009)

Beese, (2014) used a synchronous interactive video conference distance learning pilot program to expand learning opportunities for students at an urban public school. Using case study methodology, the pilot program was thoroughly examined through the analysis of multiple sources of data such as surveys of multiple stakeholders, interviews of program administrators, and the examination of student course documentation. The combination of insufficient time for planning and preparation, lack of support for students, and poor communication was detrimental to the program (Beese, 2014)

Another study has explored factors that facilitated and inhibited the teaching of online courses from an administrative perspective. Facilitating factors included concerns for institutional survival, student demand, fulfilling professional responsibilities to one's field by expanding access to the profession through online programs, and the flexibility afforded by online courses. Inhibiting factors included preparation time in terms of designing high-quality online courses, fear of and resistance to change, the fit between online education and select curricula, and missing the "energy" of the classroom (Lesht & Windes, 2011). In a study involving online mentoring practice, coordinators engaged students through telephoning each student prior to the beginning of the program, and using the tools in WebCT to establish an instructional relationship, establishing "virtual" office hours, telephoning students again mid-semester, and conducting a final exit interview (Online Mentoring Builds Retention, 2007).

From above accounts, it appears that attempts to trim core requirements and shift courses to online environments could be one answer for providing greater course access, for improving enrollments, and for enhancing student learning, increasing completion rates and increasing student satisfaction; however, choosing appropriate online environments needs careful planning and implementation. It requires that learners' motivation, challenges the face and their expectations be well understood and taken into consideration. However, not much studies or program intending to implement online education has been preceded by exploratory to studies to understand learners perspectives that may be important for successful program implementation. This study was carried out to understand factors likely to motivate potential adult learners, their challenges and expectations for engaging in online learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Engaging students in online learning

Mandernach, (2009) observes that, student engagement in online courses is still a strong predictor of student success and achievement of learning outcomes. According to McCarthy, (2012), many online assignments can be adapted to the traditional classroom learning environment as well as hybrid classroom (i.e. face-to-face with an online component) but is most effective in the online environment when a set of unique interactions and assessments is possible. Further, McCarthy observes that, the developer of the online course must consider a hierarchy of academic goals and a commitment to engage the student through multiple forms of interaction, with relevant assessment.

Another study pointed out that, there is a positive relationship between student engagement and learning when using online technologies (Chen, Lambert, & Guidry, 2010). Delaney, Johnson & Treslan (2010) notes that, online learners look for interactive characteristics that are very similar to those expected in the traditional classroom. And researchers found five components of learning that are relevant to student engagement in higher education as: academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student–faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and a supportive learning environment (Fletcher, 2005).

Student learning and satisfaction

Research has found that, clarity of a course design, interaction with the instructor and active discourse among students does significantly influence students' satisfaction and perceived learning (Swan, 2001). Pucel & Stertz, (2005) also find that student satisfaction is one of the most commonly used measures of effective teaching. Similarly, Moore & Kearsley, (2005) find

that, a primary indicator of quality in online learning is student satisfaction. However, Artino, (2008), observe that, learners' perceive satisfaction differently and base perceptions of their satisfaction on a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic measures.

Other studies have shown that, students' academic success relies on certain features of learning environments notably on small-group work and problem solving exercises (Gokhale, 1995; Johnson & Smith, 2007). But according to Winberg & Hedman, (2008), student satisfaction is the subjective perceptions on students part of how well a learning environment supports academic success.

Strong student satisfaction implies that appropriately challenging instructional methods are serve to trigger student thinking and learning. Important elements in student satisfaction are likely to concern the role of the instructor and of students to ensure academic success and increase student satisfaction. Artino, (2008) and Wang, (2003) observe that, student perceptions of their online experiences influence their reality and affect the likelihood that they will seek and be successful in online courses in the future.

Student expectations of online learning environments

Heyman, (2010), finds that identified expectations regarding overall instructional quality as a factor that affects student retention in online learning environment. Instructional quality referring to issues such as frequency of student and instructor interaction (Herbert, 2006); instructor presence in the course room and instructor response time to student needs (Artino, 2008; Ni & Aust, 2008). Herbert, (2006); Nistor & Baum, (2010) also find that early introductions, prompt response to assignments, and frequent communication with the instructor were related to retention in online courses. Additional research has indicated that student expectations regarding course demands and course content impacts retention in online courses.

Students who adopt the expectation that online courses are easier are more likely to drop out of or fail their online courses when such courses turn out to be more difficult than they had anticipated (Nash, 2005). How relevant the course content is, is a factor that affects student persistence in online courses. According to McGivney, (2004), students tend to be more active in courses when they find the material to be interesting or relevant to their daily lives. Research has also revealed a positive relationship between social interaction and student retention in online courses (Gallie, 2005). Distance learning students frequently report feelings of isolation as being a prime reason for dropping out of distance learning courses and programs (Nash, 2005).

According to Rovai (2003), feeling connected and having a sense of affiliation are essential components of effective online learning environments. Also Gaide (2004) observe that,

a social network formed by students in online courses provides students with additional support and encouragement. Students frequently report poor course design as a reason for dropping out of online courses (Frankola, 2001). The overall arrangement and organization of the course room can also facilitate or inhibit student learning.

Nichols (2010) found that ease of course navigation and easy access to course content was directly related to student retention. Research has identified a number of personal variables that affect student retention in online courses. Patterson and McPherson (2009) found that age was positively related to persistence in online courses. The competing demands of work, family, and coursework frequently presents nontraditional age students with challenges in time management (Frankola, 2001) as they attempt to balance the forces, which compete for their time and energy.

Challenges in online learning environments

Research show that, a group of Ghanaian students' who studied in a private tertiary school did not respond favorably to online constructivist teaching approaches such as asynchronous discussions and ill-structured project-based learning activities, and perceived collaborative online learning within their context as a complex, more demanding and time-consuming experience (Asunka, 2008). Many other studies have reported unfavourable students experiences with online learning stemming largely from improper planning and poor implementation and evaluation of e-learning approaches. For example, Hara and Kling, (2003) reported of students' distress with e-learning as a result of poor implementation practices that led to breakdowns in communications and technical problems.

Others reported of ambiguous instructions causing distress to e-learning students (Merisotis & Olsen, 2000). Other researchers wrote on the unwillingness of learners to participate in group assignments and the general feeling of loss due to the lack of face-to-face interactions and one-on-one support usually available to learners in traditional classroom setting (Dirkx & Smith, 2004; Stodel, Thompson & MacDonald, 2006; Maeroff, 2004). Some of these challenges and student experiences become important factors that resulted in high dropout rates in most online courses (Carr, 2000). Also, unfavourable student experiences with e-learning resulted in reduced student motivation to learn and low student satisfaction with their learning experiences (Maltby & Whittle, 2000; Kenny, 2003; and Muilenburg & Berge, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a focus group discussion as the method of choice. Focus group was used particularly for its benefits in uncovering feelings, attitudes, motivation, insights and perceptions

about expectations and challenges potential adult learners faced in online learning. This research resulting in the writing of this paper was part of a bigger research carried out in the Central Region from May to August, 2014.

This paper reports only on the results from the two focal group discussions. Two different groups were used for the discussion. Each group consisted of eight individuals and each discussion lasted for 90 minutes. The groups were carefully selected and included individuals willing to freely share their thoughts, feelings and opinions about the topic experiences, challenges and expectations they have for online learning.

The groups comprised teachers, administrators, university faculty, systems developers, instructional designers, potential adult learners and university students and graduates. A skilled facilitator led participants through an open discussion of ten carefully crafted, open-ended questions with the goal of generating maximum number of ideas from as many different people within the time allotted. Questions were designed to generate an open but guided discussion that strictly focused to the topic. Discussants were pledged anonymity. Discussants in focus group 1 were to be known as discussant 1- group 1, discussant 2 - group 1…… discussant 8 - group 1 and those in focus group 2 were to be known as discussant 1 - group 2, discussant 2 - group 2……..discussant 8 - group 2.

Questions bordered on challenges face by learners and their expectations for e-learning. The facilitator created an opportunity for all participants to add their comments and encouraged the sharing of widely divergent ideas and opinions. In effect, the focal group discussions created an accepting environment that put participants at ease, allowing them to expand, change, and deepen their answers. Responses from the two focal group discussions were summarized, categorized, and analyzed for major themes, insights, and inconsistencies. In this paper results are presented from the major themes and insights generated on the topic.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Discussant 1 (group 1) observed that online learning is comparable in quality of education offered to learners with traditional ways of learning if not better but it is important that online learning should be supported by the timely provision of learning materials, instructors who are ready and qualified to teach online and that certificates and degrees awarded should not discriminate between online learning and regular face-to-face learning.

Discussant 2 (group 1) noted that the availability of devices like computers, tablets, iPads, etc makes easy access to information and online learning easier. However, online learners should be taught how to effectively use these devices to benefit fully from the online learning experience.

Discussant 3 (group 1) observed that, online learning has opened up spaces for a large number of people to study in various academic programs. However, those large numbers affect how well the instructor can interact one-on-one with the learners and as well hampers the interactions among learners. This, the discussant noted deprives online learners of the adequate support they need to be able to do effective learning.

The discussant 4 (group 1) contributed that a large number of people are able to enroll in online or E- learning programs creating more opportunities for students to pursue online learning. That saves money since learners' will not be staying on campuses. It saves cost of accommodation and transportation involved in attending lectures on campuses and yet all that will not really benefit learners if they (learners) could not adequately engage with the content, have conversations with instructors as well as their fellow learners and cannot or find difficulty learning in the online social spaces where learners' participate in gaming, simulations or joining virtual teams to accomplish tasks and projects together in collaboration. The discussant continued that, it should be easy for learners to access course syllabus, materials for class, assignments and projects, tests and discussion forums, meet fellow learners online, join and participate in a lively learning community.

Still on challenges confronting learners, discussant 5 (group 1) added that the problem of poor Internet connection present a major challenge. The discussant noted that there is poor Internet connectivity in our country, which creates difficulties for learners when pursuing online learning. The discussant also noted that some schools and education institutions exploit learners and do not give them resources they require to learn effectively, revealing that some schools and institutes lack the necessary accreditation and approval for its operations. Also mention was made of the problem with the use of devices and equipment. Some students and adults found it very difficult to use some of the E-learning devices like the tablets, ipads, laptops, personal computers etc.

The discussant touched on the problem of finance and said that financial difficulties posed a major problem for students' when pursuing online learning. Buying of data bundles from the Internet service providers' is very expensive. There is also the problem of meeting students' needs. Difficulty in getting instructors online to respond to questions and clarify issues. Although, group chats may be possible, where learners' got the opportunities to engage with peers online, but there is a prevailing difficulty with existing provisions in the country pertaining to the difficulty of finding learners who are offering the same or similar programs to as to discuss or clarify issues with.

Discussant 5 (group 1) was of the view that, some of these institutes, which run online programme, have problem with procurement. The schools or the institute buy equipment or

devices that is not of good quality. Some of these devices do not support the program interface sufficiently well making it difficult for students to log in or access information. And also some workers or IT personnel of these institutions offering online learning are not competent enough to handle problems and difficulties that emerge with having courses online for learners.

Discussant 6 (group 1) picked it up from there and saying that some of those institutions actually lacked the right Internet connectivity devices to facilitate effective E-learning. The discussant also noted that, there is the problem of accessibility for disabled and physically impaired learners and often information and learning materials online could not be accessed due to frequent systems failure and poor Internet connectivity. Going on, the discussant observed that some of the devices in use are not at all user friendly.

This limited learners' ability and opportunity to do online learning. The discussant suggested that there should be simple guidelines which can guide learners to the right source of information to facilitate effective learning and for service providers to set up internet services or connectivity that are reliable and of sufficiently high frequency and bandwidth to enable easy access to the internet.

Discussant 7 (group 1) made a contribution that the online **c**ourse and models for disabled adults should be customized to suit their needs to enable them learn effectively. The discussant continued that, tools and devices for e- learning for the disabled learner should be user friendly. For example, the use of voice audible devices to help the blind, the use of other softwares that have been tailored to the needs of the disabled learner should be employed for effective engagement of the disabled in e-learning.

The discussant continued that, consideration for the disabled learners should go beyond their needs for the classroom or online interface. It should also address their needs for physical mobility and should permeate all aspects of their life. For example, the discussant said that facilities in use at the schools or institutions where the disabled access online learning should be user friendly addressing the specific kinds of disabilities possessed by learners. There should be a special facilitator to guide the disabled learners in their E- learning experience.

Discussant 8 (group 1) touched on visuals and interface usability and accessibility (for the disabled learner) and others. The discussant argued that, e – learning devices and materials should be attractive and simple to use. The discussant continued by saying that learners' should be assigned tasks that enable them learn on their own and in collaboration with other where necessary. The policy should make Internet connectivity and e- learning devices less expensive for the schools and colleges. Going on, the discussant said that, e – learning device should be made less expensive for educational institutions and colleges to purchase for their students.

These devices should be affordable to enable learners acquire them for their e-learning needs. Devices such as laptops, ipads, tablets, personal computers etc. should be given to the students at discounted pricing. Such a practice, the discussant noted, will enable the gain effective access the World Wide Web to experience e-learning. While above measures are in force, the discussant hinted that there should be sufficient competent technical staff on the ground to provide constant technical support to learners in using the equipment and facilities for e-learning. There should be training sections and organized group discussions or forums on how to use the equipment or devices to enhance easy learning.

Discussant 1 (group 2) said that, with the advancement of technology, many applications have been developed by software manufacturing companies to help the disabled in the society in pursuance of online learning. A typical example, was provided as the Java Web Start (JAWS), which is installed on computers to help, the blind read and type. The discussant was of the view that online learning for the hearing impaired must be in the form of pictures, graphs, symbols etc. moreover, training centres should be accessible to disabled learners so they can access the computer laboratory more frequently.

Discussant 2 (group 2) contributed that the content of E- learning course should be user friendly to all and should address all needs equally. The system should also be in a form that can be used on any device. The system should not be bias centered, it must satisfy all clients' needs. The students should be well equipped and trained to use the system and even the devices like the tablets, ipads, laptops etc.

Discussant 3 (group 2) made similar contributions and said that to facilitate online learning for the working adults, basic typing skills are needed. Therefore there was the need for training in basic typing. The discussant also suggested a need for training in basic knowledge in computing, example creating of files, how to save a document. Further, the discussant observed that the adult learner must be trained in these simple ways to be able to work and learn online. They should also be trained to navigate through the online interface and on how to access learning materials online, complete assignments and participate in discussion forums. Furthermore the discussant noted that pre-training of adult learners should be attractive and involve simple instructions; devices used should be user friendly, to enable them learn quickly. And there should also be the integration of visual cues and video learning and training for adult learners. This enables easy and faster learning.

Discussant 4 (group 2) noted that some non- working adults may not have much education and hence needs more training to be able to use and benefit from e- learning. The possibility of using a local dialect in video and audio format was suggested as something that could be done to help non- working adults to enable them learn effectively. For such audiences,

the discussant continued, the systems should be simple, easy to access and user friendly to facilitate easier and faster navigation.

Discussant 5 (group 2) said the systems should be such that learners do not have to struggle to navigate through them to access the learning content. That way learners' will be able to learn effectively. The discussant continued that system developers and instructional designers entrusted with the responsibility to design such courses should consider the cultural background of learners in designing courses for online learning. The right symbols should be used for the right people and for the right purpose.

There should be platform compatibility and the right equipment and machines should support the systems. The discussant continued by saying that, there should be provision of reminders and prompts systems to remind and alert learners and that, administrators and managers should not forget to provide new upgrades. The discussant stressed that, upgrades should be provided always and there should be regular upgrades of the system to meet changing online needs. These practices if adhered to, the discussant hinted, will help learners even disabled ones find meaning in their online learning and experience.

Discussant 6 (group 2) said there should be a guiding policy for the telecommunication companies operating in Ghana as well as their internet providing partners to provide the right package and internet connectivity for educational institutions and colleges.

Discussant 7 (group 2) was of the view that applications like the "drop box "should be used by people who access the Internet as a backup. The discussant added that manufacturers should build new machines with in-built modems of which one can insert simcards to specifically link up with telecommunication companies who operate in Ghana such as tigo, MTN, Vodafone, GLO that can help access the Internet at a faster speed. The discussant added that duopal and word processing software applications could be installed on computers to help students form group discussion platforms. Additionally, applications like the cloud computing should be installed on computers to provide rapid access to the Internet.

Discussant 8 (group 2) said a good Internet facility and a stable power supply will help people pursue online learning. The discussant added that for easy access to online learning, there should be a community based approach, that is there should be a well resourced computer laboratory with a connected internet facilities in the communities, this will help the learners within the community gain access to learning materials and resources, online and be able to submit assignments and project work on time.

The discussant shared more views on upgrading of community libraries as well as institutional libraries to have more reliable Internet connectivity. So that when people go to read and want to research more on the topic understudy they can easily access information from the

Internet. The discussant added that, backup systems such as I cloud should be installed on the computers to be used for E-Learning so that in the case of failed power supply, researched information could be retrieved. It was added that, latest technology should be used to make browsing on the Internet easier for learners.

DISCUSSIONS

The positions of the discussants from above presentation of results from both focus group discussion supports research findings in the field. For example Asunka, (2008) observation that, a group of Ghanaian students' who studied in a private tertiary school did not respond favorably to online constructivist teaching approaches such as asynchronous discussions and ill-structured project-based learning activities, and perceived collaborative online learning within their context as a complex, more demanding and time-consuming experience was supported by the views and sentiments expressed by discussants 3 and discussant 5 in group 1. Contributions from discussant 3 (group 2), discussant 5 (group 2) and discussant 2 (group 2) resonates well with findings by Hara and Kling, (2003) who reported that unfavourable student experiences with online learning has resulted in undue students' distress and breakdowns in communications and technical problems.

The positions of discussants 1, 2, 7 and 8 (group 1), and those of discussant 1 (group 2) corroborates with the findings by Merisotis & Olsen, (2000) of ambiguous instructions causing distress to e-learning students. Discussant I & 3 (group 1) positions tied in well with findings by (Dirkx & Smith, 2004; Stodel, Thompson & MacDonald, 2006; Maeroff, 2004) about the unwillingness of learners' to participate in group assignments and the general feeling of loss due to the lack of face-to-face interactions and one-on-one support usually available to learners in traditional classroom setting.

Furthermore, the views expressed by discussants 6, 7, 8 (group 1) and the views expressed by discussants 2, 3, 4,and 5 (group 2) supports findings by (Carr, 2000) that some of the challenges and student e-learning experiences become important factors that results in dissatisfaction resulting in high dropout rates in most online courses. Also, those views expressed by discussants supported finding by (Maltby & Whittle, 2000; Kenny, 2003; and Muilenburg & Berge, 2005) that, unfavourable student experiences with e-learning resulted in reduced student motivation to learn and low student satisfaction with their learning experiences.

Heyman, (2010), finding that expectations regarding overall instructional quality as a factor that affects student retention in online learning environment was implied by views expressed by most of the discussants including discussant 7 and 8 (group 2). Similarly Frankola, (2001) finding about students' frequently reporting poor course design as a reason for

dropping out of online courses was implied by discussant 5 (group 2). The overall arrangement and organization of the course room can also facilitate or inhibit student learning. The views and sentiments expressed by discussants 5 and 6 (group 2) and those expressed by discussants 6,7 and 8 (group 1) supports finding by Nichols (2010) found ease of course navigation and easy access to course content was directly related to student retention.

CONCLUSION

Taken it all together, conclusions are drawn from observations that e-learning is more flexible than face-to-face learning and that e-learning appeals to specials segments of the society that need to fit study into their busy schedule. Most e-learning candidates cannot afford to waste time, money and energy and they have specific needs and look for specific outcomes to meet those needs. Well planned and thought of outcomes for e-learning courses provide clear expectations for the course to enable adult learners become reassured and motivated learners. Vai & Sosulski (2011), observe that, universities and schools increasingly require that academic achievement be determined in terms of learning outcomes. Vai and Sosulski further write, "Outcomes speak of change in the learner. Learning outcomes are stated in terms of what the learner will know or be able to do if he has successfully completed a unit, as such they are learner-centered" (Vai & sosulski, 2011; P183). In this study, discussants have pointed out some of very important things to do to enable learners achieve the specific learning outcomes and benefit from the e-learning experience.

Discussants have shown that to be able to learning outcomes for working adults, basic typing skills are needed; therefore there is the need for training in basic typing. Also there is need for training in basic knowledge in computing, example how to create of files, how to save a document and do basic maneuvers/navigation with the computer. Adult learners should be trained in simple ways to work and learn online. They should also be trained on the interface on how to access learning materials online. Systems should be usable and the learning management system interface should be attractive and appealing to the adult learner. Instructions given them should be simple. They should be trained in diverse ways in which to learn with visual and video learning facilities and equipment.

Administrators, course designers, and course instructors should use information from this study to develop strategies for addressing student challenges and expectations in online learning. It may become possible because of this knowledge to include in the orientation sessions information regarding the need for learners to examine their personal beliefs, challenges and expectations about e-learning. In similar vein, academic leaders will see the need to communicate with learners on how personal expectations of e-learning shape

performance in online courses. Using this information, instructors can guide learners develop realistic expectations of what is possible and what is not in e-learning.

Furthermore instructors could develop and implement discussion forums that address individual expectations of online learning. Those discussions would encourage students to talk about how their expectations, experiences and how they influence their performance. More experienced learners could provide assistance to new learners on how to go about aligning personal expectations with the actual demands of e-learning.

This study suffers from some limitations. It used two focus group discussions, each focus group consisting of eight individuals. Although these people were the best crop of authorities in the field in the region, it is felt that the results could be improved by using other proven methods with a much bigger sample size. A bigger sample of respondents, with an assessment of constructs and content validity of instruments and subjected to testing by advanced statistical procedures and methods may provide improvements in the study findings.

Compared to individual interviews, survey and questionnaire, focus groups may not be as effective in covering greater depth on particular issues. A particular limitation of a focus group is the possibility that the members may not express their honest and candid personal opinions about the issues being discussed. They may hesitate to come out openly to express their thoughts, or feelings especially when they presume that their thoughts might oppose the views of other participants.

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