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ANXIETIES, CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES IN THE TRANSITION TO ONLINE TEACHING IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: THE UNISA EXPERIENCE

Abstract

Meeting the needs of students in a continually evolving education environment has created new challenges and opportunities for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Institutions. Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) across the nation are designing new programs to promote students' achievements and graduation. The technological developments provide new teaching strategies and tools used to promote learning. The constant growth of varied technological tools has a great influence on ODL settings to design such online programmes as an alternative way to serve diverse student populations.

Online teaching and learning is gaining popularity among ODL institutions as an alternative mode of teaching and learning, as it provides instant access to learning material as well as interaction with fellow students anytime and anywhere in the world. However, it is essential that Teaching Assistants (TA's) connect with students to provide students with the necessary support throughout their learning experience.

This paper draws from the literature on asynchronous learning, interviews with TA's and the authors' own experiences on the differences of online facilitation and its challenges as experienced by TA's. Although facilitation of online programmes is evolving fast in developing countries, the author concludes that online facilitation is empowering but there is a great demand for acquisition of new skills for both lecturers as facilitators of learning within the institution and the TA's who provide student support.

Introduction

Modern technology is rapidly changing the face of IHL particularly ODL Institutions. These institutions have to respond to these changes and move from traditional modes of delivery and adapt curricula to meet the needs of students. The introduction of various technological tools used in the classrooms is believed to improve the performance of students (Smith & Throne, 2007). Online teaching provides institutions with tools to enhance the way in which people learn and improves teaching.

Institutions offering distance education have begun to embrace new technology to provide teaching. Research shows that internet provides instant access to worldwide communication, flow of information (Negi, Negi & Pandey, 2011), and access to educational opportunities. It removes the barrier students may experience, allowing them to learn wherever they are. New technology offers new ways of teaching and learning and allows institutions to reach students in great numbers.

The new but additional mode of teaching and learning introduced in our institution demonstrates the institution's willingness to change, reorganise and re-curriculate their programs. This is done to accommodate the growing numbers of

students enrolling for online courses and to keep attracting more students to choose distance education as their preferred mode of learning. Asynchronous learning appears as an appropriate online model for ODL students. ODL institutions have students around the world, separated by distance, and the internet has reduced this world to a small village and made learning accessible.

Literature Review

Scagnelli (2006) states that higher education continues to experience a significant shift towards technology for course delivery and asynchronous learning has become a growing approach to online learning. Asynchronous learning is described as distance learning that uses the internet to deliver tuition any place at any time (Hastings, 2000). In asynchronous learning students require internet to access learning material, exchange and share ideas. Unlike in synchronous learning, students do not require to be logged in at the same time (Msila & Setlhako, 2012) when participating in asynchronous learning.

Asynchronous mode of learning requires students to be independent as they need to self-direct and take control of their own learning (Canning, 2010). For example, students need to plan and manage their own time of accessing the course to read and respond to e-mails and discussion forums and also chat and engage with their peers. Although the asynchronous approach to learning makes education appealing for many students (McGugan, 2002) it does however need disciplined and focused students.

Research also shows that interaction in asynchronous learning is the key element to effective and successful online learning (Swan, 2003). This depends on frequent posting of messages or individual contributions to the topics under discussion (Balaji & Chakrabarti, 2010). The contributions that students post at their own convenient time afford them the opportunity to think and reflect before publishing their messages. The process of thinking through affords them the opportunity to develop creative, critical and analytic skills (Murphy & Coleman, 2004). These are crucial and valuable skills required for online shared and interactive learning.

Important activities in online asynchronous learning are discussions. Online discussion provides a social constructivist approach to learning (Salmon, 2000). It is a platform in which students exchange ideas, share multiple perspectives and clarify thoughts in case there is some misunderstanding. Students engage in dialogues, interact with each other, and learn from each other's experiences (Carr & Duchasel, 2000) and TA's have a crucial role to play in this.

The differences between online facilitation and the contact situation

Andresen (2009) makes the point that teaching in an online environment is inherently different from the usual lecture room or contact session. It serves students that are separated by space, time, location and distance but share a common goal to interact, learn and succeed. Online facilitation requires the facilitator to allow students time to engage with the material and interact with the facilitator about what they have learnt, interact with each other (Swan, 2003) and exchange their knowledge and understanding of the material.

The responsibility of the facilitator is more important than it is envisioned. Dennen and Wieland (2007) point out that the online facilitator ensures that students engaged in deep conversation and provide reflective contributions that relate to the topic. The online facilitator should therefore adopt a new mode of communication that requires authentic learning that involves the development of deeper cognitive complexity (Ally, 2004). Thus the TA's in the ODL environment play a significant role, not only that of assessing students' assignments. For example, although the lead lecturer views the discourses between students' discussions, TA's are responsible for assessing their conversations and the written assignments. It is their responsibility to provide feedback, guide and motivate students (Edutopia, 2009).

Thorpe (2004) informs us that online facilitation has more challenges than those of everyday facilitation. For example, the TA's responses from the online interviews identified challenges experienced in the period they have been involved in assessing students work. The most glaring challenge TA's experienced is the occasional unavailability or slow internet connection. The internet glitches are frustrating to both students and facilitators. Another problem that which is a reality in South Africa, not all students come to the online environment with a good command of technology or access to devices. This barrier is a threat to online facilitation. The language barrier is another challenge as South Africa has 11 official languages yet the online environment demands proficiency in the language of learning, English. Not all students can communicate confidently and record their ideas in English.

It is expected of the online facilitator to develop his/her own relationship with the student as they participate in the learning discourse. Anderson (2010) notes that online facilitators need to find ways of expressing emotions, or passion in the subject matter when communicating ideas to students. Expressing passion about the course illustrates clear understanding and the intimate relationship with the module. The success of online teaching in an ODL environment depends on facilitators accepting new roles and responsibilities and acquiring new facilitation skills as well.

Research Method

An online interview was used to gather data about the role and experiences of TAs as facilitators of online asynchronous learning. Email interviews qualitative research methods were preferred because the TAs and the coordinator of the module were able to exchange multiple e-mails. The exchanges and e-mail interaction took four weeks at the convenience of both TA's and the researcher. As with asynchronous exchange, the e-mail interview provided in-depth information which TAs volunteered freely and not shared, viewed or influenced by other participants (Schneider, Kerwin, Frechtling & Vivari, 2002). The qualitative e-mail interviews approach were helpful and beneficial for this project in that it allowed participants to explore their discrete views, re-visit their insights, allowed for introspection, reflection and for drafting and re-drafting their responses about their role as facilitators' of online module (Meho, 2006). The approach was also selected because a qualitative e-mail interview is useful to those individuals who are not easily accessible and geographically apart as in the case of TA's participating in this course.

In order to illustrate that the study adds to the understanding and knowledge in the field of asynchronous learning and learn from previous theory on the subject, literature was reviewed. The researcher included additional information from her experience as the designer and developer of the module. The study also relied on online interviews. Extracts from interviews comments were consolidated and e-mailed to participating TA's so as to validate and confirm the information collected. This was done in order to ensure that the data collected accurately reflects what the participants had said or done. The confirmation of data provides descriptive validity to make sure that the interviewed participants agree that the collected data has accurately captured their opinions (Thompson, 2011).

Sample Description and Procedure

Out of twenty-one TAs recruited as part-time facilitators to assess our students' online discussions and written assignments, only twelve responded to the initial e-mail. Out of the twelve that responded, six (two males and four females) are permanently employed teachers at different secondary schools and private colleges; four are retired male teachers and two are students busy with their Masters' degrees. Upon agreement with the respondents for further exchange of e-mails, the researcher e-mailed further questions to understand the importance of their role; and what their relationship with students is. Further questions included their online training as well as better ways in which to communicate students.

The e-mail communication continued for a week. Every time the researcher asked probing question for further engagement and clarification. Interestingly, the respondents took time to respond to the questions asked. The responded reported that it was difficult to respond to the e-mails immediately because they needed time to think, write down their ideas, ensure that the sentences are structured properly and reflect before they could click the send button.

Findings and discussions

The article addresses one question: What challenges does the transition to online learning for ODL environment present? In addressing this question the researcher focused on:
- The role of TA's as facilitators of the online course
- The challenges they experienced in facilitating the course
- The experience of the author in managing the course

The findings show the intricacies involved in online teaching and learning. Literature reveals that online learning seems to be the preferred mode of learning. It gives students the freedom of choice as well as the flexibility of time. The findings are discussed under three themes that emerged from the study:
1. Access to internet and online challenges
2. Interaction
3. Online facilitation

1. Access to internet and online challenges

Asynchronous online learning is a form of distance learning delivered through the internet. Students need computers and access to internet in order to access the course. This was identified as a serious challenge as distance learners have to access

the internet in order to go online, anytime, wherever they are. With the development of various technologies it was assumed that access to the internet was easily available, even recognising the infrastructure imbalances in South Africa.

While online asynchronous learning seems a suitable approach for the ODL environment, the author experienced some challenges while managing the module. The repeated extension of the registration period impacted negatively on management as well as the schedule for submitting assignments. The open and continuous registration delayed the process to group students to a particular TA as such students were unable to access the course. While it is assumed that many students are young and familiar with technological platforms such as e-mails, SMS's, online learning was believed to be easy, but they found that online learning presented unique challenges.

2. Interaction and participation in online discussion

Literature reveals that the core of online learning is interaction. It emphasises three levels of interaction: interaction with content material, interaction with peers, and interaction with the facilitator. The majority of students were experiencing online interaction for the first time. This created uncertainty and self-doubt. Firstly, they were unfamiliar with the online environment and did not understand the process of online group discussion. Secondly, the tutorial letter designed to guide them through was not used as students said that they needed a face to see and a voice to hear. Some students indicated that interacting with the material without seeing a face to explain and clarify processes was difficult. Not all students have been exposed to online learning. Students therefore struggled to engage in active discussions, with the result that participation in the first two discussions was low.

3. Online facilitation

Online facilitation is an important aspect of online learning and interaction with students is critical. It is expected of online facilitators to change their roles (Andresen, 2009) and students participating in asynchronous discussion are free to access and respond to their peers' messages. Interaction with students is on-going and as such requires patience and an open-mind so as to accommodate multiple viewpoints from students. TA's as facilitators have acknowledged their responsibility to provide guidance, support, assess and give prompt feedback to students.

From the experience the TAs acquired over the three semesters, they have developed an understanding of what their roles are in terms of supporting students. However, the majority of them still do not think beyond guiding, motivating assessing and giving feedback to students. They do not view their roles as a very significant in the lives of distance learning students. From the roles listed, no mention is made of the ability to deal with group dynamics in an online environment. TAs as facilitators are closer to students than they realise. As such they need further skills to deal with issues that may arise.

Limitation of this investigation

The study was limited to TAs to understand the anxieties and challenges they may experience when facilitating this mode of learning. Not all TAs responded to the initial list of e-mail interview questions that were sent to all the TAs involved in

the module. Although only twelve of the TA's participated, the findings may be useful for further research on asynchronous learning and the actual skills required facilitating online learning.

Conclusion

While online teaching and learning facilitation of asynchronous interactive discussions of students' assignments is still in its infancy, to facilitate an online course may seem time consuming initially, but in the long term, is empowering. Interaction and facilitation of online learning is crucial to the success of the entire process, but it is how students determine their own work pace, and interact in a manner that has not previously been possible in the ODL environment. However, the role that facilitators play in the teaching and learning process has been greatly underestimated. While literature emphasises that an asynchronous approach to learning is a suitable teaching approach for the ODL environment, there is a great demand for acquisition of new skills for both lecturers as facilitators of learning within the institution and the TA's who provide student support.

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