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PEER SUPPORT: THE TRAITS AND PERCEPTIONS OF OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) STUDENTS

Abstract

ODL is characterised by a more diverse range of practices than ever before. Some of the traditional print and correspondence models are still viable and in use, while alternative means of student support systems, such as peer support, have also been developed. The use of peer support as an integral part of distance taught courses raises interesting challenges to our thinking about design and student support. The design of peer support activities is integral to both student support and course content with new possibilities for ODL as a result. In this study, the researcher asserts that all aspects of peer support activities in an ODL institution should be encouraged in the sense of fostering high quality learning. With the advent of time, it is becoming clear that distance education (DE) students require much more than distance tuition and learning materials. In spite of the high quality of learning materials, most distance students generally seem to need more human support at some stage during their academic pursuit.

Key words: students, distance education, unqualified teachers, peer support, Open Distance Learning, learning materials

Introduction

In most African countries and South Africa particularly, there is a high demand of alternative mode of delivery as majority of youth that are qualified for admission to conventional system cannot do so because of lack of space and finance. It is also obvious that due to limitations in both human and material resources, conventional institutions can no longer satisfy the snowballing population of a country like South Africa. Consequently, the emergence of ODL has marked a turning point in the provision of educational opportunities for millions of people that have been left out of the conventional system. Against this background, it has become increasingly necessary that support services be carefully developed and properly managed and maintained if ODL provision is to be relevant and recognised as complimentary to conventional higher education mode of teaching. The success of any ODL programme, *inter alia*, depends not only on how well it is designed or offered but also on how students are supported right from the outset. Services such as tutoring, technological media, counselling, **peer-group support** and administrative support mentioned by Ukpo (2006), are crucial in the context of DE systems in both developed and developing countries.

This paper presents a critical analysis of peer support as an important integral part of ODL activities. It hopes to enlighten the reader on how issues of peer support can affect ODL students at higher education institutions. The first section of this article gives a brief description of the background of the study based on the literature reviewed. This is followed by the theoretical underpinning, the research methodology and findings from fieldwork conducted with National Professional

Diploma in Education (NPDE) students at The University of South Africa (UNISA). The findings are discussed with the focus on distinct areas for improvement on the implementation of peer support as an important support strategy for teachers studying at a distance. At the end, a conclusion is given on how peer support as a support strategy in an ODL context may be improved.

Background to the study

According to Ofoha (2012) ODL is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education and its potential impacts on all education delivery systems has been greatly accentuated through the proper management, planning and constant development of quality support services. For instance, peer support, needs to be designed into distance learning programmes at the initial planning phase and this support should be “fit for purpose”. The core of argument here is that by planning peer support mechanisms as integral part of a teaching and learning programme, rather than an afterthought which can be exercised when times get difficult, ODL institutions can demonstrate recognition of the importance of this learning support. As a result, peer support should be regarded as an element in the systems of the entire support services that many practitioners should see as essential for effective provision of ODL (Keegan, 1996).

Organising quality peer support to distance-learning is particularly important because students have fewer opportunities to ask a tutor for clarification on his or her comments as a result of a geographical distance (Kasprzak, 2005). This study is based on the premise that institutional investigation of peer support can initiate more debates and may also lead to improvements in education practice, as well as giving ODL institutions the chance to review their peer support strategic plans and correct practices that are contrary to those plans.

For many students, entering higher education institutions is a major transition and yet they sometimes get little or no support as they attempt to deal with this new experience. In addition, students need proper support as they go through life (Qakisa-Makoe, 2005), especially when undergoing a major change such as entering into DE study programmes at tertiary level. Research shows that providing intensive and well-organised peer support activities for beginning students through friendly atmosphere or mentoring can lead to high rates of retention (Brewster & Railsback, 2001). Simpson (2000) quotes a small scale research which suggests that support from family and friends and from fellow students is more valued by students than from tutors. Bertram (2003) emphasises that study groups are vital from an affective perspective as they provide students with motivation and support.

Against this background, this study argues that peer support which is not properly planned and encouraged, and which is not innovative in any ODL setting is doomed to failure. It may prove disastrous to much-needed institutional rejuvenation. Transforming the ODL sector to meet present and future challenges is not easy. It entails changing public perceptions and attitudes regarding this sector. It requires critical rethinking and reinterpreting the present situation in ODL institutions in aspects such as peer support services students are engaged in.

Theoretical framework

A socio-constructivist learning theory supported this study. Socio-constructivist learning theory claims that the personal construction of knowledge always occurs in social contexts, since learning activities are socially and contextually bound (Woolfolk, 2007). The socio-constructivist theory also holds the view that learning occurs through interaction with other people and in specific settings. Wertsch (1997) agrees with this notion and he states that without social interaction with peers in the immediate environment it is always very difficult or almost impossible to acquire the real meaning of an important concept and to learn how to use it.

Peer support, as a constructivist learning activity in an ODL setting, supports the students' interactions with their course materials, the construction and building of knowledge and the testing of this knowledge through interaction with peers. To this end, dialogue which comes in the form of peer support activities in socio-constructivist learning is at the heart of ODL environment (Gravert, 2005). In an ODL context, there is a need to plan for effective peer support strategies or a dialogic space within which students engage with the content of the subject-matter and with the ideas of others (Mays, 2010). Du Plessis, Marais, Van Schalkwyk & Weeks (2010) contend that socio-constructivists believe that students are always confronted with complex educational situations hence they need ample opportunities to engage in meaningful, problem-solving activities with their peers.

Research methodology

A qualitative research design was used to study the issue of peer support in DE context. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), qualitative research extends the understanding of a phenomenon and contributes to educational practice, policymaking and social consciousness. Purposive sampling was employed, where 24 third year NPDE students were identified and interviewed from the four contact lesson centres, namely Durban, Nelspruit, Pretoria and Polokwane. Students in these centres came from all over South Africa and six students formed a focus group from each centre. These students were unqualified teachers who were upgrading their qualifications at UNISA. In purposive sampling, researchers purposefully seek typical and divergent data within easy reach of researchers (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Focus groups were chosen because compared to other forms of qualitative methods such as single interviews, they permit analysis not only of statements and reports of experiences and events, but also of the interactional context in which these statements and reports are produced (Flick, 2007). Additionally, it has been argued that "focus groups may provide quality controls because participants tend to provide checks and balances on one another that serve to curb false or extreme views" (Patton, 2002: 67).

Interview discussions were audio-taped and then transcribed verbatim. Data was recorded and organised based on an interpretive approach, derived from Wolcott's (1993) categories of description, analysis and interpretation. This approach enabled descriptions to be developed through a process called coding, and thereafter themes were developed and analysed and the meanings of the data were subsequently interpreted (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011). In that way, the researcher confirmed information he already had from other centres and by so doing eliminated

misconceptions. The researcher aimed at reporting the participants' viewpoints, thoughts, intentions and experiences accurately by making use of direct quotations in the findings. Participants were told about the nature of the research and how the data would be utilised, were promised anonymity, voluntary participation and confidentiality.

Research findings and discussion

The data analysis of this study centres around three themes, namely group work as a form of peer support service, Information Communication Technology (ICT) as a form of peer support mechanism and periodic contact sessions. Therefore, the discussions of the findings of this study will be based on each of the mentioned themes.

Group work as a form of peer support service

The real reason behind using group work in ODL institutions ought to be the aim to taste the organisational advantages of teamwork in a learning exercise. Teamwork can lead to an increase in productivity, whilst the actual learning process might be made more pleasant and involve more opportunities for individual development in comparison to traditional modes of learning. Gatfield (1999) mentions an empirical study in a higher education setting which demonstrated that students working in groups achieved a higher grade point average than those working in a control situation involving individual students.

The majority of the participants valued peer support highly. Most of the learners indicated that they managed to form study groups. Members of the groups met from time to time to share ideas concerning challenging aspects of their studies, coach and motivate one another. This, they said, brought about improvement in their performances. In the participants own words:

We exchange ideas during group work and we motivate and assist one another. It is real fun.

Furthermore, most participants such as those from Nelspruit and Pretoria agreed that they supported one another throughout their studies. A group from Pretoria remarked as follows: "*Study groups assisted a lot. They instilled confidence and evoked passion for studying*". Participants said that they formed study groups and met from time to time so as help one another. One participant from Durban commented that "*Study groups broadened my skills and knowledge*". However, when probed further, participants complained about the long distances they had to travel to meet their peers for discussions and report backs.

ICT as a form of peer support service

Technology is increasingly being adopted in many DE institutions to support the distant teaching role and to meet the growing demands from students. Developments in DE and advances in ICT have made access to knowledge and educational services around the world feasible. When using ICT in DE, information sharing possibilities are much better online – much faster, cheaper and multi-directional than by means of surface mail. For remote and scattered students, such as many of UNISA's students, possibilities for peer support, sharing of ideas and for a feeling of belonging to a learning community are far greater in a course supported by

technological media (online) compared with the traditional print. In this way, argues Pennells (2001: 182) “constructivist approaches to education can be brought to course design, so that courses can be anything but simply pumping knowledge”. ICT as a form of peer support will be divided into three sub-themes namely, telephone facilities, E-mails and faxes and MYUNISA facility.

Telephone facilities

The majority of the participants felt that they use telephones to communicate amongst themselves as peers so as “*to support one another and update and extend our knowledge and skills*”. To add, one participant from Durban stated that:

Telephones help us to discuss our assignments and exam guidelines and advice one another. I can phone members of my group at any time when I get stuck with my work.

From the above citations, it is clear that peer support through telephone discussions can catalyse a feeling of participation in an ODL context. Since participation eliminates the passiveness of an ODL student, this is a most valuable attribute of sharing knowledge.

E-mails and faxes

At Unisa e-mails could be used for exchange of messages and information with peers in order to allow for interactive and participatory learning process than the more formal methods of teaching permit. E-mail as a peer support service is popular in DE programmes because it is quick, easy and cost-effective. Similarly, paper-based faxing is one of the mechanisms that can be used by ODL learners to communicate with others.

MYUNISA facility

MYUNISA facility is the official UNISA website for students, where they can get academic support and also get online support from peers. Students can post discussion topics or questions to their discussion forums or peers for them to respond. Such a tool can support the students in the conduct of an online debate. Equally, MYUNISA supports the students with the capacity to take a stance on a topic which requires either a substantiating argument or a refutation. Students can view the arguments of their peers and add their own in the form of submissions to a dynamic online site displaying feedback in parallel frames representing the arguments presented. However, some students alluded to the fact that they do not have access to computers and therefore cannot use MYUNISA facility. Concerning this, one student from Nelspruit commented as follows:

In my place we are faced with a problem of not having computers. As a result, I cannot use MYUNISA. I stay in a village and I do not know how to use a computer.

From the above, it is evident that some NPDE students lack computer skills, let alone logging onto MYUNISA site. Consequently, they cannot use e-mails or MYUNISA fruitfully. Students also said that MYUNISA system gets overloaded at busy times (such as when UNISA assignments are due) and that students who post their answers to assignments to encourage discussion are at the risk of plagiarism as anyone can copy their answers.

Periodic Contact lessons

In an ODL setting, where contact lessons are periodically held, students can share their views and enhance their knowledge. For example, peer interactions and related learning experiences can be monitored and assessed while lessons are in progress and instructional designs or learning methods, if necessary, can be adapted immediately (Mays, 2010). At UNISA, NPDE students attend contact lessons four times a year for about three days at the four centres, namely Durban, Nelspruit, Polokwane and Pretoria. A group from Pretoria remarked as follows:

Contact sessions are good because I always gain lot of things and I share ideas with other students. This instils confidence and enhances the passion of studying as we solve our problems together during contact classes.

From what is said, it follows that during NPDE contact lessons at UNISA, learning becomes active and meaningful, as ideas are shared, information is exchanged and problems are solved co-operatively. The class in this case becomes a social arena for examining knowledge, for testing what one knows and for increasing one's knowledge.

Conclusion

ODL can be an isolated and solitary experience for many students. Contemporary practices in distance learning tend to provide meaningful and worthwhile opportunities for learners to interact and communicate with others in the learning process. ODL institutions should urge learners to participate in online chat sessions or to communicate with others through e-mails or telephones. Such activities, however, are sometimes devoid of any explicit learning opportunity and tend to be included as a contemporary rather than as a deliberate form of learning activity. This study has investigated several deliberate learning activities that can encourage students to interact and collaborate in a meaningful way. The findings have been discussed to provide a way for distance students to communicate so that the involvement of others acts as a stimulus and support for learning.

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