E-readiness of ODL multicultural lecturers: Implications for effective mediation

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Abstract
This article is a narrative report of the findings from an analysis of multicultural facilitators’ discourses on their e-readiness in the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) affordances in open and distance learning (ODL) mediation experiences. Firstly, the findings revealed by qualitative deconstructive discourse analysis (DDA) indicated that the majority of ODL facilitators/instructors lack e-readiness skills that are critical in the effective manipulation of ICT affordances in teaching and learning in ODL environments. Secondly, some facilitators did not fully understand what undergirds ODL pedagogy, principles and practices. The institution’s academic lecturers are periodically given e-training but this seems to be inadequate. The author argues that a comprehensive orientation tutorial package covering e-readiness, e-training and ODL principles and practices should be organised for all inexperienced as well as newly employed lecturers to prepare them appropriately for the rigors of ODL pedagogy.

Keywords: ICT affordances, ICT adaptances, learning mediation, e-readiness, ODL facilitator/instructor

INTRODUCTION
Open and Distance Education (ODE) or Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is quite an old approach to education. Distance learning has a history spanning over a century involving different teaching approaches and following the technological evolution concerning the delivery of educational materials and the communication between learners and instructors/lecturers. As information communication technologies (ICTs) have taken on a more visible role in people’s lives, moving from research institutions into communities, schools and homes, people have become more aware of how these are both mediators of, and in themselves, learning settings in ODL.

A significant body of literature (Fullan 1994; Heinrich 1995; Wang 2002) supports the view that the way lecturers teach is a product of their own education, training and experiences. It is unreasonable to expect lecturers to change their existing pedagogical approaches if they have not been provided with sufficient and appropriate training in how to work with ICTs and incorporate new teaching technologies into their mediation methodologies. Borotis and Poulomenakou (2004,
view e-readiness as ‘the mental or physical preparedness of an individual for some e-learning experience or action’. E-learning readiness and preparedness helps lecturers to design e-learning strategies comprehensively and to deliver effective learning experiences to ODL students (Kaur and Abas 2004). Students must also be e-ready so that a coherent achievable strategy, tailored to meet their needs, may be implemented (Infodev 2001). Invariably, e-learning readiness assessment provides key information to organisations to help them supply solutions which can cater to the specific needs of each learning group (McConnell International 2000).

Despite a number of South African higher education institutions (HEIs) embracing ODL as delivery mode, studies have shown that while the higher education system functions relatively well, higher education faces major challenges, such as: low participation rates; high attrition rates; a curriculum that does not speak to society and its needs; the absence of an enabling environment that allows every individual to express and reach their full potential; and poor knowledge production that often does not translate into innovation (National Planning Commission 2011). While knowledge production is the rationale of higher education, high quality knowledge production cannot be fully realised with a low student participation rate; a curriculum or an environment that is alienating and does not articulate the vision of the nation; and an academic staff that is insufficiently qualified (National Planning Commission 2011). The challenge facing HEIs is to accommodate as many students as possible and ODL remains the best vehicle to meet that demand cost effectively.

ODL HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The British Open University was set up in 1969 to widen access to education in Britain and has served as a model to many others. It introduced a programme for a certificate in education for graduates who wanted to enter teaching but had no professional qualification then. Students used computer conferencing as an integral part of the course to interact with tutors and with each other. The University of the South Pacific teaches education, and other disciplines, by combining correspondence lessons with broadcasts and with regular sessions at regional centres within its region. The university was one of the earliest users of communication satellites and is able to run two-way seminars with its students by means of satellite links.

In Colombia in the 1970s, a radio-based school reached over 100 000 rural peasant students every year. The National Technological University in the United States (US) is using satellite and broadcasting technology to meet the needs of engineers for postgraduate study without their having to leave their jobs and attend lectures on a campus. In China, the combined use of television, classroom sessions, and printed materials is providing university education to about a third of all the students in higher education. Uganda set up a number of programmes designed to equip untrained and unqualified teachers with professional skills. In the 1970s, for example, Tanzania succeeded in recruiting 45 000 potential teachers of whom 38 000 went on to get their qualifications (Chale 1993, 31). Other countries, such as Kenya,
Nigeria, Lesotho, Botswana and Zimbabwe to name but a few, have exploited ODL methodology in one way or another in the mediation of learning.

So, ODL often makes use of several different media and does not rely on the online mode of delivery only as it is often misconstrued. Students may learn through print, broadcasts, the internet and through occasional meetings with tutors and with other students. The question of ODL legitimacy is no longer an issue as most of the traditional institutions have gradually incorporated it.

MULTICULTURAL COLLABORATIVE PARADOXES

Advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) and applications have made ODL a fully viable alternative to traditional education, thereby creating a natural environment for the development of effective virtual learning communities to multicultural students in the host countries in particular and the globe in general. Naturally the multiplicity of cultural identities and diversity requires that teaching and learning experiences must reflect as such.

But contrary to the growing flatness that Friedman (2007) reports, cultural diversity remains apparent among lecturers, perhaps owing to deeply rooted cultural values and modes of thinking that are difficult to separate from learning processes (Nisbett 2003). A growing appreciation of cultural diversity is demonstrated by more than its acknowledgement and tolerance, but also by a desire to preserve that diversity as a valuable asset for addressing the many challenges faced by the global community now and in the future. Additionally, a strong desire can be recognised to preserve diversity in response to the threat of loss of cultural identity in the face of globalisation and because of the benefits of community cohesiveness through unique cultural expression (Mason 2007).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK UNDERPINNING THE STUDY

In the adult working world, networking, collaboration and adaptation are some of the preferred principles of practice in information sharing, growth and development as well as benchmarking – particularly when it comes to ODL. So, much has been said about ODL adult learning (andragogy) Knowles (1990), but very little on academics (lecturers) becoming continuous adapters to affordances that are designed to enhance teaching and learning. ODL andragogical/pedagogical principles and practices remain relevant to adult learning more so when it comes to ICT affordances being the main modes of information dissemination, teaching and learning.

In my analysis, I identified three theories that served as the theoretical lens that I used to explore and further examine how e-ready academic lecturers were in working with ICT adaptances in selecting the most appropriate blended ODL affordances in their teaching and learning. These included: self-directed learning as the preferred model; adults’ experience as a rich course resource; a problem-based rather than a subject-centred approach; and the importance of a social context for
learning (Knowles 1990). I viewed facilitators/instructors as adults who can embark on self-directed learning while executing their primary function of facilitation. Through practice and exposure, lecturers are capable of changing with the times and translating those changes in the way they design their curricular and learning development given the multiplicity of ICT gadgets.

Another influential adult learning theory is referred to as ‘experiential learning’ (Kolb 1984). This theory describes the adult learning process as a cyclical pattern wherein the student moves from experience, through reflection, to conceptualisation and then action. This process forms the basis of many training and learning events, and more recently for ODL workplace recording of continuous professional development. However, Brookfield (1995, 4–5) adds a cautionary note to the wholesale acceptance of experiential learning as the defining feature of adult learning:

Because of the habitual ways we draw meaning from our experiences, these experiences can become evidence for the self-fulfilling prophecies that stand in the way of critical insight. Uncritically affirming people’s histories, stories and experiences risks idealizing and romanticising them. Experiences are neither innocent nor free from the cultural contradictions that inform them.

A third focus of research is particularly relevant to online ICT education of adults, namely, the social context of learning. The various strands of this theory have been brought together by Wenger (1998, 6) in his account of learning as social participation. While social interaction is not a prerequisite for all types of learning, many tasks in an ODL workplace either rely on teams or are conducted through interaction with clients, suppliers or fellow employees. Wenger (1998) sees these communities of practice (CoPs) as pervasive not only in the workplace, but in all aspects of society:

We all belong to communities of practice. At home, at work, at school, in our hobbies – we belong to several communities of practice at any given time. And the communities of practice to which we belong change over the course of our lives. In fact, communities of practice are everywhere (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The flow chart indicates the mediation process that happens between an ODL student and the facilitator/instructor.
The instructor uses his/her adaptances (ability to use operational competency skills to select and manipulate the most appropriate ICT affordances that can be used effectively in mediation of learning processes). The student works with interactive ICT affordances in engaging with learning processes and submits tasks using the same mode of delivery (Nyoni 2012).

The value of communities for learning is that they create, hold and distribute knowledge in ways that exceed individual capabilities. The designated portal for ODL e-information dissemination and e-learning mediation was used as a case to gather the views of chairs of department (CoDs) and academic instructors/facilitators on its use. Wenger (1998) opines that CoPs change over time and those changes are brought about by a number of factors. Some of the factors could be attributed to technological advancements that might influence learning mediation methodologies, retirements, political, innovation and many others.

**E-READINESS FOR WORKING WITH ICT AFFORDANCES**

New developments are emerging continually in the realm of ODL education. These developments have impacts on different aspects of distance learning such as teaching-learning, student support services, evaluation and assessment, and ODL management systems are undergoing revolutionary changes. I have witnessed some distance education (DE) institutions such as the University of South Africa (Unisa) adopting ODL andragogy/pedagogy as vanguard for leadership, management, instruction and learning. The paradigm shift necessitates adopting a mind-set that allows adaptive adjustments to be made in the way academics deliver their instructional modular programmes and curriculum design. In order for instructors to succeed and survive in an ODL institution given the multiplicity of ICTs digital affordances, they need to be endowed with appropriate adaptances. Adaptances in this context refer to knowledge and competency skills acquired through practice that allow instructors to identify student centred ICT instructional tools that can be manipulated in the process of mediating learning. Adaptances allow the ODL facilitator/instructor to break with orthodox DE methods by incorporating new and student centred blended methodologies in an endeavour to bridge the gap between campus and student. Lack of ODL oriented ICT adaptances may at times dissuade ODL lecturers from blending their traditional instruction and learning methods with the most appropriate ones that appeal to the newer generation of students.

As the readiness of academic lecturers/facilitators to use the new technology is critical to the success of implementing e-learning in ODL institutions, it is worth investigating if and how they are prepared to embrace the new technologies in mediation of learning experiences. The purpose of this research was thus to analyse e-readiness of lecturers/facilitators on the use of the new technologies in ODL environment. It was hoped that the experience gained from this research would be beneficial to other ODL institution exploring the use of e-learning technology in new teaching and learning activities.
The following question was used to frame the study:

How e-ready are academic lecturers/facilitators to use the e-education portal for e-information dissemination and e-learning in mediating learning experiences to students?

METHODOLOGY

Deconstructive discourse analysis (DDA) and internal criticism were employed, which were guided by a developmental qualitative critical case study methodology. The methods for analysing the data consisted of a developmental critical case study (the chief), DDA and internal criticism, which were guided by a developmental qualitative critical case study methodology (MacLaure 2003). The study involved four chairs of departments (CoDs) and five facilitators/instructors from a multiracial ODL institution on a voluntary basis. The purpose sampling method was the most preferred since I specifically wanted to involve ODL practitioners. The following data collecting methods were used: password secure blogging (Mann and Stewart 2000; Hewson, Yule, Laurent and Vogel 2003); semi-structured interviews (Waldo 1998; Fowler 2002); and participant observations (Kawulich 2004). A blog is the short form for a weblog (Jacobs 2003), and is written by individuals or groups of people on the World Wide Web (www). The data collection processes continue until data saturation occurs. It is required by the methodology that I maintain a critical attitude towards CoDs and facilitator/instructors’ adaptances needed in selecting the most appropriate ICT affordances in ODL learning mediation (Cohen and Omery 1994, 138–139; Crotty 1998, 78, 80–81).

DDA incorporates a similar critical attitude towards the meanings permeating in the data and towards my own beliefs. Its essence is captured in MacLure’s (2003, 3) argument that people’s commonsensical beliefs of educational realities (MacLaure 2003, 9, 171–173) should be deconstructed and torn apart to enable proper engagement with the discursive educational realities (MacLaure 2003, 4). The third method, internal criticism, helps in systematic and comprehensive analysing the textual materials examined in this article. Bell (1999, 113–116) suggests that internal criticism could be used in critically analysing the contents of a document in terms of its genre; the language it employs; the author’s background and experiences; the purpose, background, reliability of the document, and so on.

Having examined the methodology and methods for analysing the primary textual and discursive data used in the article, I went on to explore the views of facilitator/instructors on how they went about identifying ICT affordances to be used for mediating learning and their implications for ODL andragogy.

ISSUES OF TRUSTWORTHINESS AND RIGOR

For purposes of reliability, validity and triangulation, I used a variety of rigor data collection methods to establish the possible truth. According to Creswell and Miller (2000, 316), ‘Since there can be no validity without reliability, a demonstration of
the former [validity] is sufficient to establish the latter [reliability].’ I developed my own concepts of validity and either generated or adopted what I considered to be more appropriate terms, such as quality, rigor and trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Seale 1999; Mishler 2000; Stenbacka 2001; Davies and Dodd 2002). Therefore, reliability and validity are conceptualised as trustworthiness, rigor and quality in qualitative paradigm (Golafshani 2003).

**FINDINGS, THEMATIC DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The aim of the study was to analyse the voices of ODL instructors/facilitators, including CoDs, on the use of an internet designated e-education portal (site) for e-information dissemination and e-learning mediation to students in an ODL institution. This was done from multiple lenses to find out how the various elements influence facilitators/instructors’ ICT adaptances and usage, and ICT in mediation of learning practices in an institution. The study allowed me to draw conclusions from the deconstruction of blogs posted by participants on how they viewed the use ICT as one mode of learning mediation. The focus was on an ODL oriented higher education level, keeping in mind multicultural interactions. DDA results were categorised into the five themes discussed hereunder.

**Results of using the e-education portal (site)**

Here are two examples of comments from facilitator/instructor’s blogs on the ability to use the e-education portal for e-learning mediation (Nyoni 2012). Gender issues were not taken into cognisance in the current study.

Prof XXX (Age 51, Male, South African) said: Through MyUnisa, lecturers can link with all learners who have computers (email facilities) in a particular course or module and learners can also link together so that they communicate amongst themselves. In this way, learners can help one another and are able to communicate (as individuals or as a group) with their lecturer at any given time. Through MyUnisa, learners are able to form study groups, and can also motivate and advise one another. Therefore, learners have the opportunity for engagement with the university and one another through this technological facility (05 April 2012 09:20:00 PDT).

Dr XXX (Age 40, Female, Kenyan) said: The adoption rate is low among lecturers because the feeling from several academic staff is that it is additional work and because some learners are not online, it is regarded by them as optional. Some lecturers are reluctant to use this facility simply because they still believe highly in print media or are not computer literate. Presently, the university provides a one day training opportunity for UNISA staff so as to be able to use the facility of MyUnisa effectively. Not all lecturers have been trained thus far. Furthermore, the MyUnisa that is currently in place requires significant improvements in learner-lecturer interaction – a goal of any DE model that focuses on decreasing transactional distance between lecturers and learners, learners and the institution, and learners themselves (01 March 2012 10:44:00 PDT).
As the quotes illustrate, qualitative discursive texts were obtained in relation to bloggers’ views on the use of an e-education portal (site) for e-information dissemination and e-learning mediation. In these examples, two contrasting views of instructors/facilitators are indicated. However, a large number of bloggers posted negative texts questioning the viability of the e-education portal (site) but agreed that it was an appropriate interactive tool for e-learning mediation.

Overall, four general conceptual themes characterised participants’ views of the utilisation of the web page for ODL learning mediation, as revealed through examining the prevailing conceptions and discourses that are manifested in the textual data of the article.

**ODL epistemologies and ontologies**

The lack of clear cut and coherent ODL theoretical foundations did not help to allay the confusion and uncertainty among instructors/facilitators in education. Some of the primary discursive texts by some of the bloggers read: ‘For me the differences between DE and ODL are blurred you know! Some of us believe ODL is online teaching and learning [to which] the majority of our students do not have access.’

Traditional forms of DE involve passive media, such as correspondence texts, audio and video broadcasts, and often involve the learner communicating with only the instructor. This could partly be attributed to the fact in the past, the majority of academics worked in or were associated with DE institutions; hence, their resistance to adapt. However, internet technologies have improved the traditional forms of DE through increased communication (Schrum 1998; Mclissac and Gunawardena 2001). The distinctions between newer forms of DE utilising ICTs and traditional face-to-face education are being blurred in the facilitation of individualised and collaborative learning (McIsaac and Gunawardena 2001). McIsaac and Gunawardena (2001, 403) state that the explosion of ICTs has brought learners together (social presence) by erasing the boundaries of time and place for both site-based and DE learners.

**Critical conceptions of ODL principles and practices**

Advocacy for the promotion of ODL, and scepticism about ODL institutions, programmes and products exist and persist concurrently in equal measure. Underpinning this challenge is the growing, enormous and urgent need to train, retrain and continuously refresh the knowledge and skills of each nation’s workforce in an increasingly globalised knowledge economy.

**Lecturers’ ICT e-readiness in ODL facilitation**

There is still a group of instructors/facilitators who lack even basic ICT skills, which is probably a question of motivation and interest (Korte and Hüsing 2007). Findings seem to indicate that there are a large number of instructors/facilitators who feel demotivated to engage in some form of self-directed learning (Knowles 1990). One common thread read as follows:
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Presently, the university provides a one day training opportunity for UNISA staff so as to be able to use the facility of MyUnisa effectively. Not all lecturers have been trained thus far. Furthermore, the MyUnisa that is currently in place requires significant improvements in learner-lecturer interaction.

Some participants admitted in their blogs that they were unable to use the site to mediate learning. They argued that they were more comfortable with paper-based instruction.

Mentorship and orientation

Ragins (2007, 282) defines diversified mentoring relationships as ‘mentors and protégés who differ on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, socioeconomic class, or other group memberships associated with power in organizations’.

As the study indicated, difficulties arise from workplace challenges to diversity, such as racism, sexism, homophobia and ageism, which can disrupt and create a hostile environment. These challenges, if not detected and resolved via constructive leadership, will lead to loss of innovative potential and ultimately to failure in the undertakings of an organisation. In a study by Ragins and McFarlin (1990), a mentor was defined as an individual with advanced experience and knowledge that is committed to providing support and upward mobility to your career. Multicultural mentoring is a critical pedagogy that creates spaces for differences and celebrates democracy by facilitating inclusion and participation and this is clearly lacking in the ODL institution in the current study.

DISCUSSION

The study showed that ICT was used: (1) as a tool for delivering material or for practising a specific learning content, which was a traditional way of using ICT; (2) as a tool for supporting collaboration or knowledge creation, which was a change from the previous teaching practices; (3) as a tool for structuring teaching/learning processes, which was a change from the teacher’s management practices; and (4) as a content for studies; this ‘academic’ knowledge helped instructors/facilitators to use it also in learning practices and to develop high-level adaptive expertise (in the laptop project). However, the study also revealed that a large number of instructors/facilitators lacked ICT adaptances to work with ICT tools in learning mediation.

The online world is a medium unto itself (Carr-Chellman and Duchastel 2000; Ellis and Hafner 2003), it is not just another learning environment. There are vastly different dynamics in online versus old DE courses.

Because of the different dynamics, material that works well in a traditional DE does not necessarily work as well in the online environment (Ellis and Hafner 2003) and often needs to be reengineered, modified or redesigned for online mediation (Zirkle and Guan 2000; Koszalka and Ganesan 2004). Simply taking material that was developed for DE delivery and directly importing it into course management
programmes such as WebCT or Blackboard tends to be neither effective nor recommended (Ellis and Hafner 2003).

It is therefore important to emphasise that an increase in technology does not necessarily translate into an increase in learning, and can in fact, lead to an increase in problems (Mandernach 2006), technology blues and wailing students (Sieber 2005). The current status of ODL pedagogy requires instructors/facilitators to have the appropriate prerequisite ICT adaptances in order to be effective in their facilitation processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Reeves (2008) suggests that, ‘There is a need to make changes in the way technology is used in education to better take into account the digital competence students have.’ This is, indeed, strongly dependent on the ICT related pedagogical competence of the instructor/facilitator. Instructor/facilitators as indicated in the study bemoan the scarcity of development programmes that are few and far between. It would be advisable therefore that such e-ready programmes should be increased to include not only newly employed employees but other experienced ODL personnel to bring them on board with ODL principles and practices. No newly employed practitioner should be allowed to practise until they have completed proper e-ready orientation inductions to increase their ICT adaptances. At the same time, multicultural awareness should not be forgotten when designing staff development programmes as failure to do so might render such efforts fruitless (Banks et al. 2001).

CONCLUSION

Appropriate e-ready ICT affordances enhance e-learning mediation opportunities for multicultural students’ participation in progressive inquiry, collaborative learning and the students’ active engagement in the knowledge creation process. However, as Lin (2001) says, the relationship between facilitator/instructors’ conceptions and practice, is complex, not clear or simple. ODL facilitators/instructors empowered with appropriate e-ready ICT adaptances use ICT affordances appropriately in accommodating students’ needs (Moseley, Higgins, Bramald, Hardman, Miller and Mroz 1999) and they appear to have adequate pedagogical means to pursue new pedagogical practices (Hakkarainen, Palonen, Paavola and Lehtinene 2001). However, ODL institutions invariably need to introduce well-grounded employee centred e-ready orientation programmes for newly employed, novice and experienced ODL instructors/facilitators in order for them either to choose appropriate or to reject inappropriate ICT pedagogical mediation tools. Another influential adult learning theorist (Kolb 1984) refers to the ‘experiential learning theory’ adult learning process as a cyclical pattern wherein the student moves from experience, through reflection, to conceptualisation and then action.
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