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Full Length Research Paper

Blending traditional face-to-face tutoring with internet based tutoring services: constraints and benefits to (ODL) students and tutors

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Developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has forced many Open and Distance Learning (ODL) systems in developing countries particularly in Sub Saharan Africa to adopt tutorial delivery modes characterized by wholesome importation of e-learning packages with hopes of achieving developed countries' success stories of increasing access, quality and affordability. However, it seems these African (ODL) systems are experiencing challenges in adjusting their tutorial delivery modes in order to accommodate e-learning technologies in a ways that suit their local conditions. It is critical to find out how (ODL) systems in Africa are coping with these constraints without compromising the needs of their local students who may still have to depend on face-to-face tutorials. This paper sought to find out the views of 415 stratified randomly selected Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) students and 102 tutors on how traditional face to face tutoring can be blended with Internet based tutoring. A case study methodology was used to gather and analyse data. The interview and the questionnaire were used as data collection instruments. The results show that both face-to-face and Internet based tutoring have strengths and weaknesses. While the application of each of the modes had barriers, students and tutors were positive about blending face-to-face with Internet based tutoring. The study recommends that face to face tutoring continue to be given high priority in (ODL). However, management of face to face tutorials must meet students' expectations. The study recommends that development of Internet based tutoring infrastructure and e-course materials be a priority in (ODL). Internet based tutoring must be implemented considering student's socio-economic backgrounds. Implementation of Internet based tutoring services must be facilitated by (ICT) skills development programmes for both tutors and students and extra incentives for tutors.

Keywords: Face-to face tutoring, Internet based tutoring services

INTRODUCTION

Hussmann and Miller (2001) perceives Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as a generic concept covering different forms of learning where learners study at times

and places that satisfy their conditions. Moore and Tait (2002) argue that tutorial delivery models in (ODL) attempt to minimize the physical separation of learners from tutors and from other learners by utilizing learners' social and work environments and by continuously exploring learning opportunities that overcome barriers caused by personal, work commitments and geographical

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location. Armstrong (2000) claims that (ODL) in Africa has widened access to tertiary education resulting in improved quality of manpower development. The e-learning mode of delivery in (ODL) is widely viewed as a vehicle to reach out many students globally despite some constraints.

Hanna (2008) is of the view that the demand for quality, improved accessibility, flexibility and lower costs shapes the environment that characterizes the modes of tutorial delivery in (ODL). For example Connick (2008) claims that an online University is an offshoot of a traditional University that offers additional courses and programmes on the Internet. A virtual University on the other hand is an (ODL) system offering all its programmes exclusively on the Internet with no physical campus. Other kinds of (ODL) universities use modes that suit their purposes. For example Hanna (2008) categorizes universities by purposes such as offering professional education to ensure workers keep abreast of current knowledge and skills and providing education in work-related situations. These universities use both modern market-driven and traditional face-to-face delivery modes. Examples include Phoenix, San Diego and Washington State University in America. It was thought to be interesting to find out how Zimbabwe Open University would compare with similar universities in the Western World.

The Internet platform is becoming popular for (ODL) learners and its use as a tutoring mode is increasing. According to Fung and Carr (2012) Internet based tutoring is a form of distance learning where a tutor places course materials on a web sever where it can be accessed by students. Finkelstein (2006) claims that internet based tutoring requires that teaching materials be validated at source first before being integrated into the course programme. In this mode of tutoring, students can be directed to search for additional reference materials relevant to their studies. This study therefore sought to investigate the employability of this mode of tutoring at the Zimbabwe Open University in the light of constraints and benefits to tutors and students.

It is generally accepted that tutorial delivery modes in (ODL) systems in the developed world are characterized by efforts to achieve effectiveness without face to face tuition. Patton et al (2007) claim that internet based learning in developed countries is viewed as a tool for increasing access into higher education especially by marginalized students as it is cheaper and more flexible. The Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK) for example has programmes that utilise the internet for the majority of its students. Various modes of internet based tutoring such as computer mediated conferencing and e-mail are in use at the Open University of UK (Price, Richardson and Jelfs 2007).

Several success factors of internet based tutoring in the developed world (ODL) have been identified. Beggs (2010) and (2005) and Gerlich and Mills (2003) identified technology factors such as adequate technological

resources, incentives for using technology, increased comfort levels in using technology, and the need to improve existing teaching methods. McKenzie's (2000) study of e-learning tutors in the UK identified tutor motivational factors such as, flexible working conditions, ability to teach large student audiences and opportunity to acquire new technological skills.

However internet based learning in developed world's (ODL) systems has some challenges. For example, drop out rates from e-learning education are much higher than in traditional classroom teaching (O'Connor et al 2006). Clayton (2004) found that the integration of technology into teaching and learning has failed to preserve a sense of community in the university.

Internet based tutoring in the developing world is facing some constraints. For example, Romiszowski (2004) found that internet based tutoring was being imported and utilized in developing countries in its primary form hoping that it would achieve the same success as in the developed world. However, this wholesale importation of (ICTs) into developing countries has problems. For instance, Gerlich and Mills (2003) argue lack of skills to design and deliver internet based tutoring course material affects the quality of instructional strategies. The Syrian Virtual University (SVU) for example is integrating its home grown tutoring services with internet based learning programmes imported from accredited American and European Universities. While these integrated programmes are internationally and locally accredited by the US department of Education and other international accrediting bodies and have tutoring services provided through the internet by Arab professors from different parts of the world (Daniel 2004), Laaser (2006) argues that the model of the Syrian Virtual University can be regarded as a local broker of foreign online degree programmes entering the Syrian University education market.

In the Sub-Sahara Africa challenges include social, political and economic (Juma, 2001; Muilenburg, 2000). According to Juma (2001) the (ODL) context in Sub Saharan Africa is experiencing challenges of overcoming social, financial, and technical barriers and currently trails the rest of the world in developing appropriate internet based tutorial delivery modes responsive to its social, financial and technical environments. Muilenburg (2000), is of the view that e-learning initiatives in Africa are experiencing challenges of resistance to change, slow pace of implementation and rapid technological changes. There are other challenges which include lack of electricity (Juma 2001), poor maintenance of equipment (Laaser 2006) and lack of skills among the tutors (Koul 2005).

There are notable initiatives in overcoming African challenges such as strategic alliances between African (ODL) systems and developed world universities. Koul (2005) observes some (ODL) programmes in Africa that partner with Universities in USA, Europe and Asia in

offering courses through the internet. The African Virtual University AVU for example was initially a World Bank project that started with a network booster uplinked in Maryland USA. According to Juma (2004), the AVU tutorial delivery model combines an integration of satellite technology and the internet. Professors around the globe deliver tutorials that are beamed to AVU learning centers across Africa linked to the signal. This system for example allows a student in Rwanda to interact with a professor based in Zimbabwe and students in Nigeria. However Laaser (2006) notes technological challenges of poor internet infrastructure, low band width and high cost tariffs. Another militating factor is low internet access in Africa which according to Laaser (2006) is approximately 1% of the global internet access. Murphy, Walker and Webb (2005) argue that tutorial delivery modes that target few students with high levels of capital investment per student are not viable in Africa. This research will attempt to identify some of the constraints preventing the development of internet based tutorial services at (ZOU).

Protagonists of traditional face to face tutoring such as Fung and Carr (2010) argue that face to face tutoring facilitates understanding of instructional materials. Price, Richardson and Jeff (2007) compared students at Open University UK receiving tutorial support that involve face-to-face with student contact by e-mail on one hand and online computer mediated conferencing and e-mail in place of face to face tuition on the other hand and discovered that those that received face to face support attained higher ratings. Similar studies by Steeples, Jones and Goodyear (2002) conclude that students who received internet based tuition without face to face tutorials produced poor ratings. Kwok Chi Ng's (2007) findings established students' dissatisfaction with communication systems and tutor control functionalities in internet based tutoring. Richard (2000) concluded that students who received internet based tutoring without face to face tutoring obtained lower scores in course work assessments. Finkelstein (2006) believes that there is no substitute for conventional face to face tuition (ODL). The personal and immediate feedback to students inherent in face to face tutorials is very critical.

However, traditional face to face tutoring has some weaknesses. One of the major weaknesses of traditional face to face tutoring is that it offers no cooperative activities beyond the classroom (Yuen 2010). Chen and Jones (2007) cite its limited base for sources of information for learners when compared to e-learning technologies. Banda aria (2007) claims that face to face tutoring does not provide extra resources that offer learners extra competence and confidence.

Internet based tutoring also has notable weaknesses such as time and effort in organizing and preparing technical details of presentation. Bunnett, Priest and McPherson (2006) argue that a lot of time is needed by both tutors and students to prepare internet based tutoring. Bennett, Priest and McPherson (ibid) further

argue that tutors who teach through the internet experience heavy demands of teaching and managing tools of communication and information presentation. Carswell et al (2000) in a study of social dimensions in internet based tutoring concluded that students sometimes feel uncomfortable in expressing their views and sharing their perspectives through the internet if they don't know each other. Berge (2005) argue that both tutors and students need to be trained to compensate for the lack of paralinguistic dimension in tutoring through the internet. While Prince, Richardson and Jelfs (2007) acknowledge that students receiving tuition through the internet report poor experiences than those receiving face to face tutorials, they also argue that thorough training of both tutors and students on how to communicate through the internet is a precondition for successful internet based tutorial services.

This research sought to empirically establish challenges and benefits of blending internet based tutoring and face to face tutoring in a developing world (ODL) context.

Statement of the problem

It seems (ICTs) enabled (ODL) systems in developed countries to reach out to the student market globally. Third World countries have problems that have been stated above and the gap between the rich countries and the less rich is increasing all the time. It was deemed interesting to find out how Third World countries (particularly Zimbabwe) were coping with the constraints. The economy of Zimbabwe went through a meltdown process and has not fully recovered. What could be critical challenges inhibiting (ODL) systems in Africa such as (ZOU) to utilize (ICTs) and its tutor expertise to reach out to students globally? Perhaps there is a danger in compromising traditional programmes by replacing face to face tutoring with e-learning programmes. It seems this scenario calls for research to explore alternatives for improving existing modes of delivery through incorporating aspects of e-learning that complement the traditional tutoring modes.

(ZOU) has regional campuses located in each of the country's provinces. In addition it has one virtual regional center that only offers programmes to foreign students exclusively through the internet. All its regional centers are connected to the internet bandwidth. However there are opportunities to improve the quality of its tutorial delivery services through utilizing existing internet infrastructure, tutor expertise, and become global. What are the challenges and benefits? This study seeks to identify constraints and benefits that accrue to (ZOU) students and tutors through blending traditional face to face tutoring with internet based tutoring services.

The study sought to find out constraints and benefits that accrue to ODL students and tutors in blending

traditional face to face tutoring with internet based tutoring services at the Zimbabwe Open University

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are to:

(i) Assess students' attitudes towards traditional face to face tutoring at ZOU.

(ii) Assess tutors' and students' attitudes towards internet based tutoring at ZOU

(iv) To identify student and tutor related barriers inhibiting implementation of face to face tutorials and internet based tutoring at ZOU.

(vi) To identify students' and tutors' benefits from Internet based tutoring services

Research questions

(i) What are students' views towards face to face tutoring at ZOU?

(ii) What are students' and tutors' views towards Internet based tutoring services at ZOU?

(iii) What possible student and tutor related barriers inhibit implementation of face to face tutoring and Internet based tutoring at ZOU?

(iv) What benefits can students and tutors derive from Internet based tutoring services

Research methodology

Research design

The research was a case study. According to Robson (1997) a case study is a detailed empirical investigation of the problem within its real life context using multiple sources of data. The case study adopted a situational analysis approach viewed by Borg and Gall (Eds) as an approach where the problem is studied from the viewpoint of the subjects (students and tutors). The respondents' views pulled together from their view points provided an in depth perception in understanding the problem. The case study applied qualitative and quantitative methods. Quantitative methods used questionnaires so as to collect detailed extensive data. Qualitative methods used interviews to collect intensive data.

Research instruments

The questionnaire

The questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from both students and tutors. The questionnaire enabled collection of data from many tutors at students from the university's ten regions. It enabled triangulation with data gathered from interviews and eliminated bias that could have resulted from personal dimensions inherent in interviews.

The Interview

The interview technique was used to collect data from tutors. The interviews were structured with wording and sequencing of questions fixed to ensure that variations that appeared between responses were attributed to actual differences between responses and not on variations in the interviews. However the interview schedule had some open ended questions to give tutors liberty to express their opinions.

Data collection procedures

The researchers first sought for permission and introductory letters from the regional director to carry out the research in the University. Questionnaires for students and tutors were administered by the researchers during weekend tutorials. Questionnaires for other regions were posted during the same period. The researchers conducted interviews with tutors during the same period.

Target population

The population was final year students from each of the four faculties in the university's ten regions. Final year students were selected because the researchers assumed that they had attended more tutorials and their long learning experiences enabled them to express mature expectations. Fulltime and part time tutors from all faculties in the ten regions formed the other part of the population. It was assumed that tutors were a rich source of data because of their day to day experiences in tutoring.

Table1 Students' ratings of attended face to face tutorials

Service	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Totals
Adequacy of face to face tutorial time	0 0%	0 0%	30 7%	385 93%	415 100%
Coverage of course content by tutors	0 0%	60 15%	155 37%	200 48%	415 100%
Timely tutor feedback of written assignments	0 0%	11 3%	84 20%	320 77%	415 100%
Provision of face to face tutorial handouts by tutors	0 0%	0 0%	50 12%	365 88%	415 100%
Provision of face to face tutor support in to extent material in modules	0 0%	0 0%	25 6%	390 94%	415 100%
Provision of opportunities for student/student interaction	90 21%	240 58%	73 18%	12 3%	415 100%
Encouragement from tutors	109 26%	200 48%	86 21%	20 5%	415 100%

Data analysis procedures

Descriptive statistical analysis was used to interpret quantitative data. Analysis of quantitative data was done using tables and percentages. Qualitative data was presented in summaries of themes.

Data presentation and discussion

Biodata for students and tutors

Demographic data

Data was collected from randomly selected 415 final year students and 102 tutors from all regions and faculties. The majority of students 213 (51%) were female while 202 (49%) were male. A large majority of tutors 72 (70%) were male while 30 (30%) were female. A small majority of the students 155(37%) clustered in the (34-40) years age range. A large majority of the students (243) (60%) reside outside the towns where regional centers are situated. About half 231(56%) of the students use mobile phones for internet access while a large majority 90(88%) of the tutors use university facilities. A large majority 90(88%) of the tutors had no previous experience in e-tutoring while (300)75% of the students had never participated in e-learning modes such as discussion boards, chat rooms, video and teleconferencing.

Students' views towards face to face tutorials

Students' perceptions on benefits derived from face to face tutorials

The majority of the students 406 (97%) benefited from face to face experiences with tutors. Three hundred and eight nine (93%) benefited from face to face psycho-

social support from fellow students. All students 415 (100%), viewed face to face tutorials as a platform for sharing study skills and for putting theory into practice.

Table 1 shows that a large majority of students were not satisfied with time allocation, content coverage, timely feedback on written assignments and provision of extra learning materials during face to face tutorials. However, about half of the students expressed satisfaction with student\student interaction.

Students' and tutors' views towards internet based tutoring services

Students' expectations on Internet based tutoring services

The majority of the students 305 (73%), expected Internet based tutoring services to assist students in networking with fellow students. A large majority of the students 312 (75%), expected improved networking with students in other regions. A large majority of the students 395 (95%), expected to network with students in the virtual region. The majority of the students 360(88%), expected improved communication with their tutors while (73%) expected that the internet services link them with alumni members.

Tutors' views on factors that might facilitate implementation of Internet based tutoring

The majority of the tutors 102(100%), require incentives for the extra teaching load and for producing teaching materials for Internet based teaching. More than half of the tutors 60 (59%), require regular faculty/programme based (ICT) skills training workshops. A large majority 100(98%), were of the view that Internet facilities at regional campuses be upgraded. About half of the tutors 54 (53%), required review and selection of courses to be

Table 2.1 Tutors' views on benefits tutors may gain in teaching through the Internet

Benefit	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Increase in knowledge and skills in ICT	89 87%	13 15%	0 0%	0 0%
Increase in opportunities to experiment with e-learning pedagogy	102 100%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%
Increase in comfort levels in tutoring and programme coordination	60 59%	40 41%	2 0%	0 0%
Broadening of access to information	66 %	35 %	2 0%	0 0%
Increase in opportunities to communicate with students in the programme	102 100%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%

Table 2.2 Tutors' views of benefits students may get in utilizing internet based tutoring services

Benefit	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Improved harmonization of tutorial delivery within the faculty	54 53%	44 43%	2 2%	2 2%
Improved platform for sharing learning materials among students	59 58%	40 39%	1 1%	2 2%
Improved platform for student/student interaction	102 100%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%
Improved feedback communication channels from tutors	65 66%	31 30%	3 3%	3 3%
Facilitation of research and scholarship among tutors and students	52 51%	46 45%	4 4%	0 0%

put on Internet based tutoring.

Students' and tutors' views on barriers inhibiting implementation of face to face tutorials and internet based tutoring

Students' perceptions on barriers that inhibit participation in scheduled face to face tutorials

The majority of the students 234(56%), were of the view that transport costs were a hindrance to attending scheduled tutorials. About half of the students 234 (56%), were concerned with the location of tutorial venues while 236(57%) were concerned with scheduling of sessions.

Students' views on factors that inhibit their access to Internet based tutoring services

The majority of students 204 (49%) cited inadequate (ICT) skills as a barrier in participating in Internet based tutoring. A slight majority 186 (45%), cited limited access to Internet facilities. While 202 (49%) were concerned with affordability of extra fees that may be required. A slight majority 202 (48%), cited affordability of e-learning hardware for example laptops, as a barrier.

Tutors' perceptions on factors that inhibit their participation in Internet based tutoring

The majority of the tutors 53(52%), strongly agreed that increased work load is a militating factor .A large majority 91 (91%) of the tutors were concerned with extra time involved in planning Internet based tutoring. The majority of the tutors 84(82%) were of the view that lack of incentives is a barrier to tutor participation. A large majority 98 (96%) were of the view that inadequate Internet infrastructure for students had a negative effect on their participation. The majority of the tutors 84 (82%), were of the opinion that inappropriateness of certain course content for Internet tutoring was a militating factor.

Students and tutor's views on benefits of internet based tutoring services

Table 2 shows that the largest majority of the tutors were of the view that Internet based tutoring was going to increase opportunities in exploring and experimenting with e-learning pedagogy as well as in communicating with students.

Table 2.2 shows that a large majority of the students were of the view that Internet based tutoring was a better platform for student / student interaction and tutor

feedback communication.

RECOMENDATIONS

The study recommends that face to face tutoring continue to be given high priority in (ODL) as students derive important benefits from it. However, management of face to face tutorials must meet students' expectations and minimize barriers that hinder attendance.

The study recommends that development of Internet based tutoring infrastructure and e- course materials be a priority as they are benefits to both students and tutors. Internet based tutoring must be implemented with due consideration of student related socio-economic factors that affect students' participation. Implementation of Internet based tutoring services must be facilitated by (ICT) skills development programmes for both tutors and students and extra incentives for tutors.

The study used a small sample of tutors and final year students. Further research can be done using larger populations.

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