

Appraisal of Face-to-Face Interaction in Open and Distance Learning System in Nigeria

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Abstract

A major challenge confronting open and distance learners is the problem of isolation, boredom and loneliness, as a result of the inability to constantly meet with their tutors and peers. To address this challenge, many distance learning institutions in Nigeria have established the face-to-face system to complement the instructional materials issued to their learners. This paper reviews the practice of open and distance learning in Nigeria, with an analysis of the effectiveness of use of face-to-face system along with other teaching materials. In conclusion, the study attempted to present a mix of approaches to face-to-face interaction in open and distance learning, which can be regarded as sustainable considering the socio-economic realities in present day Nigeria and the need for open and distance learning to meet the demands for Education For All.

Introduction

The historical antecedents of distance education in Nigeria dates back to the colonial era. Nigerian students took courses in their different programmes through the correspondence system from institutions such as the Institute of Education, University of London, Wolsey Hall College, Bennett College, Ripid Results College among others (Omolewa, 1978; 1986; Fagbamiye,

2000; Owoeye, 2004). It is instructive to note that interaction between students and their instructors take place essentially through the study materials which were shipped to the students via the post. These study materials contained assignments which students were required to answer and return through the post within stipulated dates. The instructors at the institutions on receipt of the assignment responses would comment on them extensively, paying careful attention to identifying areas needing improvements and encouraging students to re-submit in certain cases. Such was the nature of distance education in the early periods in Nigeria and students earned degrees, certificates or diplomas after years of learning without ever meeting face-to-face with their instructors.

Predictably, this approach has many shortcomings, one of which is the fact that the course materials issued to the learner were more or less like the text books which can be obtained at the bookshop. The students had great difficulty understanding vast proportions of the reading materials issued to them. The difficulty arises from the need for distance learners to acquire discipline for relating with the texts which is not an easy task when one is studying several courses alone. The second and perhaps the more significant shortcoming associated with the early correspondence approach is the lack of face-to-face interaction between the learners and their instructors or any functionary of the correspondence education institution whatsoever. This problem derives from the fact that distance learning is an isolated activity and if there is no constant mediation via appropriate learner supports, learners may become discouraged and this could and frequently leads to their dropping out from the programmes.

Studies into the needs of distance learners reveal the fact that lack of contact with instructor is one of the most significant causes of dropping out from distance education programme (Powell, 1971; Grahm, 1971). These studies recommended that other than reading texts, additional reference materials, and other communication media such as television and cassettes be provided, contacts with tutors through personal visits, telephone calls be encouraged, and that more frequent and comprehensive assignments be provided to students. In another study, Idle et al. (1978) found that distance learners need to know others' opinions about their progress; wished to hear instructions verbally, clarifying the areas of difficulty; wanted to know the tutors' opinions prior to doing assignments and wanted to know exactly what was expected.

In addition, the more the distance between the institution and the students places of residence, the more insecure they felt and the more insecure the students, the greater the desire for group activity and interaction.

The importance of face-to-face interaction as posited by Powell (1971) and Graham (1971) was also stressed by Keegan (1986), while describing the essential features of a distance learning system. He observed that “the presence of two- way communication allows learners and tutors to interact through selected media and there is possibility of face-to-face meetings to facilitate greater interactivity in the learning process.” Holmberg (1983) observed that there is a basic assumption that real learning is primarily an individual activity and is attained not only through an internalising process. This is to be regarded as a background theory on which distance education is based. It leads to an examination of how individual learning can be supported and facilitated. He argued further that both the presence of learning materials in a printed form or other-wise, pre-produced course materials and the two- way communication brought about by interactive assignments, infrequent tutorial meetings and group activities serve the purposes of didactic communication, which forms the underscores optimal learning achievement in open and distance learning.

This study, therefore, examined the practised open and distance learning in Nigeria, both in its single and dual mode expressions, vis-a-vis the application of face-to-face interaction either through physical meetings and/or through the use of instructional media. It also identified a sustainable mix of approaches to face-to-face interaction that would contribute optimally to the achievement of the objectives of distance education institutions in Nigeria and by extension other developing countries of the world.

Distance Education in Nigeria

The distance education environment in Nigeria is defined strictly by post-secondary institutions. The Ahmadu Bello University started two distance learning programmes, the Teacher In-service Education Programmes (TISEP) in 1967, and the National Certificate in Education by correspondence course (NCE/cc) in 1976. The TISEP was designed to upgrade both the untrained and trained but uncertificated primary school teachers in the northern states by correspondence and face-to-face courses.

In 1974, the University of Lagos established the Correspondence and Open Studies Unit (COSU), which later came to be known as the Correspondence and Open Studies Institute (COSIT), representing the first conscious attempt to establish a distance education unit as part of a university in Nigeria. At inception, the institute now referred to as the Distance Learning Institute (DLI) offered only B.Sc. degree courses in Accounting, Business Administration, Science Education Courses (including Mathematics, Biology, Chemistry and Physics) and the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE). The PGDE programme was subsequently suspended due to poor demand since it was offered essentially as a full-time face-to-face programme and there were other institutions running the PGDE on a part time basis.

The National Teachers Institute (NTI), Kaduna was established as a teacher training institution in 1976, with the mandate to upgrade the skills of in-service teachers and train Grade II teachers (TCII). The institute was specifically established to meet the demands for teachers for the Universal Primary Education (UPE) scheme which was launched in the same year. In 1990, the institute added the Nigerian Certificate of Education (NCE) programme to its complement of programmes based on the rationale that the minimum teaching certificate in Nigeria was to be the NCE, as stipulated by the National Policy on Education (NPE, 1977, revised 1998). More recently in the year 2004, the institute added the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) to the number of programmes it offers to students.

The University of Abuja was established in 1990 as a dual mode institution, with a Centre for Distance Learning and Continuing Education as a strong component of the university. The centre offers a large number of first-degree programmes including English Studies, History, Economics, Political Science, Business Administration, Public Administration, Accounting, Geography, Sociology and Law. The university invariably, was expected to fill the gap created by the suspension of the National Open University in 1984.

The University of Ibadan also has a Distance Learning Centre which grew out of the Department of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies in 1988. The centre offers several B.Ed. programmes under the departments of Adult Education, Guidance and Counselling and Teacher Education. By 1997, four more departments, namely Special Education, Library and Archival Studies,

Educational Management and Physical and Health (now Human Kinetics and Health Education) joined (Owoeye, 2004). All these departments offer the B.Ed. with the exception of Library, Archival and Information Studies which awards the Bachelor of Library Information Science (BLIS) degree. Their faculties such as the, Arts, Agriculture and the Social Sciences also joined in making some of their programmes available to distance learners through the Distance Learning Centre.

Several other Nigerian universities, such as Obafemi Awolowo University, Abia State University, Olabisi Onabanjo University, also have distance learning centres where they offer different complements of courses to different categories of distance learners. Inclusive are the sandwich summer programmes offered by many institutes of education of Nigerian universities to upgrade the skills of in-service teachers, who may want to upgrade their certificates from NCE to B.Ed. Apart from these, there are professional training institutions which are largely privately-owned either by individuals or corporate bodies which offer professional training in different areas to distance learners. The training institutions prepare students who wish to sit for the professional examination of professional bodies such as the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Nigeria, the Chartered Institute of Bankers, Chartered Institute of Insurance of Nigeria, Chartered Institute of Personnel Management and the Nigerian Institute of Management to mention a few. The kind of training provided for them could equally be classified as a form of distance teaching/learning.

The National Open University of Nigeria is the latest in the line of institutions offering distance learning programmes in Nigeria. It is the first single mode open and distance learning university in the West African sub-region. It was initially established in 1983, but was suspended nine months later due to modifications in government policy. In 2002 the National Open University of Nigeria was resuscitated to meet the huge gap in application and admission statistics of Nigerian universities. The university took off with about 78 programmes at the Proficiency Certificate, Certificate, Diploma, Bachelors, Postgraduate Diploma, and Masters levels under four schools and one centre, viz: the Schools of Arts and Social Sciences; Management Sciences; Education, and; Science and Technology as well as the Centre for Lifelong Learning. The university currently has 65 study centres spread across the six geopolitical zones of the country. In addition to these, the university has its

headquarters located in Lagos, a planning office at Abuja (the Federal Capital Territory) and a Centre for Educational Technology and Entrepreneurial Development (CETED) at the Kaduna Campus.

Institutional Approaches to Face-to-Face Interaction in DE in Nigeria

Interactivity in distance learning became the focus of attention in the last two decades of the twentieth century, because of the perceived and manifest “loneliness” which has been associated with distance learning. Consequently, distance learning institutions have put different mechanisms in place to mediate between the instructors and distance learners with a view to assisting and encouraging distance learners to complete their courses successfully. The most important of these are instructional/tutorial facilitation; print-based course materials written in an interactive style, assignments which lead to tutor comments that are conversationally didactic, application of different technology-based instructional media etc. However, the intensity of face-to-face courses varies from institution to institution and with courses and programmes. Agboola and Giwa (1985) observed that some institutions use face-to-face contact teaching to supplement their teaching while others use it to complement teaching. In institutions where it is used to supplement teaching, little or no new topics are taught. The sessions are in such cases used for remedial, counselling, or practical work, and for seminar classes to explain further the lessons already taught using other distance learning strategies. The duration of the sessions varies depending on the distance education institution involved. In some institutions, the sessions extend over a period of four weeks or more depending on the nature of the subjects being offered. Some distance education programmes are designed such that attendance at face-to-face sessions is compulsory, and in some others, it is optional.

Where attendance is obligatory, face-to-face teaching is often used to complement correspondence teaching, as is the case with the NCE by correspondence programme of ABU, Zaria whose contact sessions run for about ten weeks at a stretch each year. At the Distance Learning Institute of the University of Lagos, learners receive course materials at the beginning of the semester during the induction period, and afterwards they are required to study on their own for most of the semester. Okunuga (1985) also confirmed that there are arrangements for tutorial facilitation for distance learners on

Saturdays and Sundays after the church service. Students are also made to come into residence for face-to-face instruction full time for a particular period of time in preparatory to the end-of-semester examinations. This usually takes place when regular students are off-campus and it lasts for a period of six weeks. The first four weeks for tutorials and practical, while a week examination preparation break is allowed, afterwards another week for the end-of-semester examinations.

The NTI on the other hand has 6 zonal and 37 state offices and about 1300 study centres across the country (Mohammed, 2006). Tutorial facilitation takes place at the study centres most weekends and sometimes during the week. The tutorials are facilitated by instructors around the locality and the study centres are usually located in secondary schools and other post-secondary institutions around.

The Centre for Distance Learning at the University of Abuja has contact venues spread within Abuja, such as Model Primary School, Asokoro; Government Secondary School, Festival Road, Garki; primary schools at Areas 10 and 1, Garki. The centre also has some facilities for the contact sessions with students at its permanent site. It also depends on the facilities provided, after due payments by the Department of Education, Federal Capital Development Authority. Students usually come into residence for pre-examination preparation about a month to end-of-semester examinations.

At the Centre for Distance Learning of the University of Ibadan, bachelors' degree students receive study packs at the beginning of the session. The study packs comprise print-based study materials, CD-ROMs, Audio tapes and relevant information on the centre and resource persons that facilitate an uninhibited interaction between students and the resource persons. Students are required to interact with the course materials for at least eight months. There is an integrative period of eight weeks for tutorials and examinations. The end-of-semester examinations take place on the university campus. Diploma programmes are delivered through face-to-face teaching. However, each programme has its own unique requirements for effective learning (CDL, UI, 2007).

The Obafemi Awolowo University distance learning provides part-time

studies leading to award of degrees, diplomas or certificates. It is more or a less a part time studies programme that is directed at the executive classes and other specific areas of need. The centre's programmes include: Executive Master's degree programmes in Business Administration, Information Technology, Technology Management, Industrial & Labour Relations; PreDegree Programme; B.Ed./BA Education (Sandwich) programmes; Computer Science (Non-degree Diploma); Diploma in Information Technology, and; B.Sc. Nursing Science. All are offered with full face-to- face contact either at weekends in the case of the executive programmes and in the evenings in the case of Nursing Science and non-degree diplomas or full-time separate campus location in the case of pre-degree programme.

The professional training institutions in Nigeria are largely privately-owned and they offer training courses for candidates registered for the professional examinations of professional bodies in Nigeria. Students have a choice as to whether they want to study full time or part time. However, the course materials are prepared by private individuals in some cases and in certain cases prescribed by the professional bodies themselves. They are prepared according to the prescribed syllabus of the professional body involved. As such students are required to study for the examinations and sit for them strictly as private candidates. Since most of the candidates are working class people, they tend to offer the classes as part time study, either after work in the evenings and/or weekends only. This is done through face-to- face organised teaching.

At the National Open University of Nigeria, students are provided with a range of support services to assist them benefit optimally from their studies. This includes the grading of periodic tutor- marked- assignments by the tutors, which are returned to the learners with useful comments to guide their understanding on the answered questions. Another form of interaction is through the tutorial meetings at the university's study centres located across the six geopolitical zones of the country. These sessions provide opportunity to students to explore their studies in greater details under the guidance of their instructors than when they studied alone.

Qualified tutors who are part-time staff of the university and experts in the various fields of study are used to conduct the tutorials. At these tutorial sessions, the topic or topics presented are discussed. Questions are asked and

answered. Suggestions, interpretations or explanations of issues of concern at hand are provided. It is also an opportunity to find out the reactions of other colleagues to certain self -assessment questions asked in the study material. Sometimes the tutorial facilitator may require a student to do a lead presentation on a topic while others listen as a means of leadership training. The tutorials are essentially in face-to-face situations. However, they may also be by means of group online chat when and where available.

In addition, counselling services are provided by the university as another phase of face-to-face interaction with learners. Each study centre has at least two counsellors. Unlike the case of conventional universities, counsellors are central to the process of distance learning. Thus, counselling psychologists are always available to confer with students at every stage of their academic pursuit from the period they make the decision to join the university to the time they finally graduate. Students who need guidance, advice, information and counselling are usually encouraged to approach the counsellors, so that they (counsellors) can assist them in solving problems that border on both academic and social issues.

Deduced Sustainable Approaches of Face-to-Face ODL Interaction for Developing Countries

The need for and importance of face-to-face interaction in open and distance learning is easily established. According to Olumide (1982), one of the major drawbacks of the traditional correspondence students is isolation, both physical and psychological, from the academic community to which he subscribes. The isolation/loneliness of the distance learners is the most common reason for his giving up a course (Peratton, 1973). Consequently, face-to-face interaction goes a long way towards overcoming the constraints imposed by distance education. It probably has psychological advantages over the other forms of mediation either electronic media or correspondence in that it encourages the student to learn or motivates him to start learning (Peratton 1973; Kinyajui 1974). Turbill (2002) listed the advantages of face- to- face to include: Time for reflection, time for sharing classroom experiences and responses to reading with peers, opportunity for collaborative learning in small groups, opportunity to try new classroom instructional strategies and opportunities to work as co-leaners.

Considering the various approaches adopted by different distance teaching institutions in Nigeria and other parts of the world, it is difficult to state that one approach is what works best for all situations. However, there are some elements of an effective face-to-face interaction system that could be adopted by DTIs which would meet the requirements for interactivity without undermining the original objectives of the distance learning approach to education. Many institutions in a bid to ensure that physical interaction complements the course materials issued to learners have made the face-to-face meetings the whole essence of distance teaching. Access may be restricted by this approach because some learners may not always be in attendance at the regular meetings due to other social and vocational demands.

An effective face-to-face interaction approach is obviously one which allows learners to study at a distance for their courses, meet at intervals as the need arises without compromising their social and vocational responsibilities. As a result, a mix of approaches which suits the learners and reflects the socioeconomic realities of the society must be adopted. For instance, access to internet technology and other computer-mediated communication in Nigeria is still very low. Thus, it is not sustainable to adopt a fully technology-based face-to-face interaction model such as video-conferencing and computer-mediated communications.

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) has a useful model, in which face-to-face interaction holds infrequently at designated study centres at times which are convenient for the learners after due consultation with their instructional/tutorial facilitators. In addition, peer-interaction is also encouraged by the institution, this is done by establishing study centres which have facilities where learners can hold discussion groups at pre-arranged times. The NOUN also has an arrangement with some prison facilities to deploy instructional/tutorial staff to the prison facilities to conduct face-to-face sessions with inmates who are registered for the programmes of the institution, taking into cognizance the issue of security in the prison facilities. This arrangement is also available, in principle, for women under the Islamic tradition of Purdah. Facilitators are deployed to tutor them under their husbands' roofs, after due arrangements have been made with the Directorate of Learner Support of the institution. All these are put in place to ensure that face-to-face interaction is brought into the distance

learning system to eliminate the isolation/loneliness and discouragements rich distance learners are confronted with if they are left to their devices unattended.

Another aspect of face-to-face interaction which institutions would find useful is to ensure that their instructional/tutorial facilitators are not just deployed to facilitate distance learners because they possess paper qualifications which indicates their competence in a subject matter, rather "ere is the need to give them training on the psychology of adult and distance learners, how to effect academic counselling to motivate distance learners and also very importantly, be made to get they must schooled in the philosophical basis underpinning the open and distance learning system. In addition to this, there is the need to constantly evaluate the activities of supervisors that have been assigned to guide distance learners through their "udies. This way the institution would also be informed on the effectiveness: their tutors and the gaps and needs of the face-to-face system. Finally, distance teaching institutions must have an adequate spread of study centres to affect their face-to-face meetings, because if students have to travel great distances to reach the nearest study centres, the effectiveness of the face-to-face system will be discounted no matter how well organised it is. Thus, institutions must endeavour to establish as many centres' as possible for the institutions to be able to meet the need of their clusters of their students who are spread over vast geographical expanses.

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