Enhancing Access to Learning through Blended Learning and Convergence Approaches in Open and Distance Education

Olugbenga D. Ojo
School of Education
National Open University of Nigeria
olugbenga.ojo@gmail.com

Abstract

The introduction of open and distance learning worldwide has resulted in a paradigm shift in the mode of education delivery. This shift has been accompanied by innovations of different elements of information and communications technologies. It also goes with approaches that are enhancing in the change of the old mode of education for real. This is facilitated by the creation and adoption of different strategies for promoting access to educational opportunities for all and sundry. This paper considers the role and impact of blended learning and the convergence of approaches on open and distance learning delivery mode of education in ODL institutions within West Africa. Blended learning and convergence approaches in ODL are discussed in relation to the viability of e-learning for improving the quality and reach of access to educational opportunities through the open and distance learning approach. The paper also concludes with some recommendations of sustainability strategies for implementing blended learning approaches in sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: Blended, access, convergence, distance education, open education

Introduction

Access to education in the developing countries of the world especially in Nigeria where the open and distance learning paradigm is still relatively new is problematic due to the available number of qualified candidates whom the available higher institutions cannot offer admission to study their course of

choice. This is also in addition to the available numbers of those who want to improve on the programme of study they initially had. Although there had been a few institutions running the dual mode system before the advent of the National Open University of Nigeria, a full- fledged distance learning institution in 2003, their efforts could not solve the problem of offering admission to the teeming interested learners aspiring to get educated at higher level.

Institutions offering distance education along with their traditional method in Nigeria include, according to Olakulehin and Ojo (in press), the Ahmadu Bello University which started two distance learning programmes, the Teacher In-service Education Programme (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. Also, the University of Lagos which, in 1974, 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) offers 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 parttime basis.

The National Teaches' 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 compliment 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. Other 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 compliments 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 professional 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 and learning.

Distance education, unlike before, is technologically driven although there are still some aspects that are taken care of directly by human physical efforts such as course facilitation that takes place through face-to-face. But for the purpose of making teaching and learning to take place in an atmosphere that is highly conducive to the learners who are executive or otherwise, that are always far away from the four walls of the classroom due to the nature, commitments and their locations, there is need for the introduction of blended learning and convergence of approaches to the mode of teaching and learning in distance institutions. This move portrays an attempt to see that distance education achieve its purpose and objectives been conscious of the encumbrances which the impact of the attendant effects of the above raised issues can have on its operations regarding teaching and learning activities.

Blended learning is the combination of traditional face-to-face classroom methods with modern computer-mediated activities for the purpose of teaching and learning activities in open and distance learning environment. It is a situation whereby different learning environments were mixed for the convenience of the learner. According to its proponents, the strategy creates a more integrated approach for both instructors and learners. Formerly, technology-based materials played a supporting role to face-to-face instruction. Through a blended learning approach, technology will be more important. It can conclusively be described as an approach that integrates e- learning techniques (or technology) with traditional classroom- based learning and the different means of teaching and learning. Any distance learning institution deploying blended learning and convergence approach to its teaching and learning service would make available the combination of face-to-face teaching-facilitation, print facility-course materials and the use of technology facilities such as video tapes and CD-ROMs containing recorded course materials and instructions and online instruction as its means of carrying out teaching and learning. The online delivery may be synchronous or asynchronous. An asynchronous method of delivery may utilise a platform such as WebCT or Blackboard as a posting board for asynchronous communication with students. More synchronous delivery

modes include the use of web conferencing, virtual chat, or web cams to provide for real time interaction between instructor and students or between learning sites. Likewise, video delivery may consist of asynchronous, semi-synchronous, or synchronous methods. Goodsell and Armstrong (2001) described this method which includes the use of various technological devices to learning and teaching to be a "converged" approach to distance learning instruction.

However, it is this development that culminates in what is entrenching distance learning as a mode of education to be reckoned with coupled with the values that all the technological innovations are adding to the quality of educational process. This observation was corroborated by Powell (2007) who observed that distance learning has become a rather well entrenched aspect of public affairs education at the graduate level. Today, the undergraduate programmes level in distance education mode cannot be left out.

Role and Impact of Blended Learning and the Convergence of Approaches in Open and Distance Learning Education Delivery Mode

As mentioned above, NOUN as the first full- fledged open and distance learning university with others be it dual mode or otherwise in Nigeria as well as those that are located in other countries and others that are just coming up are actually seeing to the running of the distance education mode in sub-Saharan Africa. Technologically, NOUN started its e-learning activities that support other required components for blended learning with the basics, the use of audio tapes and progressed to the use of CD-ROM, interactive video and according to Ipaye (2010), a most standard e-learning laboratory using one of the best Integrated Learning Management Systems, iLMS, available. According to him, when developing the iLMS through some notable experts, the university had suggested that the experts bear in mind the need to be as eclectic as possible so that in terms of technology to support both asynchronous and synchronous instruction, the consultants should try every imaginable and available tool (websites, wikis, blogs, Second Life, e-mail, Twitter, course management systems, video/audio podcasts, Facebook, threaded discussion lists, video/audio/text chat, video conferencing software, and lots more). Eclecticism here means that even the old and

conventional practices are not discarded in the development of e- learning platforms in developing nations. The NOUN iLMS is to be designed to accommodate a platform like a graphical MOO that contains a text chat pane on the left and a display pane on the right in which the facilitator can show just about anything online -- WebPages, presentation slides, graphics, video etc.

Other institutions and institutes rely mostly on print materials- course materials and face-to-face facilitation for their teaching and learning activities. Invariably, the roles and impact which blended learning and convergence approach indirectly forced on the National Open University of Nigeria include:

a.   sensitising staff and students of the university towards the use of e-*learning tools*
b.   develop capacity in e-learning and provide leadership in this aspect of ICT utilisation in Nigeria and within the West African sub-region
c.   raising general awareness of the academic community of e-learning tools
d.   providing systemic and continuous support for staff and students in the use of e-learning
e.   establishing a culture of innovation which has automatically led to experimentation in educational provisions
f.   including e-learning in the portfolio of teaching and learning tools at NOUN
g.   establishing and disseminating through advocacy, the need for good practice in this area of teaching and learning in Nigeria and within the West African sub-region
h.   the need to provide, as part of the university's strategic plan, a sound infrastructure for the development and delivery of e-learning tools and services.

The objective and goal of the roles and impact enumerated above is to provide an avenue for making the distance learning mode in sub-Saharan West Africa an enhanced quality education which is functionally cost-effective with value that projects quality in accessibility that transcends all barriers. With blended learning and convergence approach to teaching and

learning activities in place, institutions whose primary function and focus is the provision of access to education through open and distance learning mode would get developed in all ramifications with a noticeable growth and improvement in the provision of facilities that would enable it serve its customers and also service the processes that would enhance its mode of students 'teaching and learning.

Viability of Blended Learning and Convergence Approaches in relation to ODL

With the use of blended learning and convergence of approaches to learning and teaching, is the tendency for the expansion of distance education to be made easily possible for institutions due to the access it will create for everybody irrespective of distance of location. It will also in totality reduce both geographic and non- geographic barriers to access as it will eliminate or reduce the need for students with physical disabilities and students who are executives with various official commitments to travel to study centre sessions. The learning method and approach will also allow for flexibility in scheduling teaching and learning activities for students especially those who are full time employees. The technology component of the blended learning and convergence approach would enable students participate in a classroom teaching and learning process due to the opportunity which the internet would afford him or her. Such students could log on into the virtual classroom from wherever he/she is at any particular time or at his own time watch and listen to a video session of a particular topic in a course or rather listen to the recorded tape /CD of any course of choice. This is aptly supported by the assertions of Reagan (2004), Hung, Tan and Chen (2005) and Ritchie and Newby (1989) when they observed that distance learning enhances the amount of participation in class. Learners who are to be absent either by omission or commission in the classroom for whatever reason through virtual chats and email could contribute to classroom discussions.

It is also imperative to point out the fact that blended learning and convergence of approaches to teaching and learning process in an ODL environment would help eliminate the burden of students' isolation which is characteristic of distance learning due to the lack of traditional face-to- face

classroom situation. Participation in classroom settings is now open to students wherever they are located and physical attendance in an organised classroom facilitations is by choice since other avenues to participate in the classroom events have been made available.

Lastly, the concern for space and increase in number of students' enrollment which many private and public higher institutions always express and which by extension always lead to problem of access to education for many qualified candidates are expressly taken care of by blended learning and convergence approach in the open and distance learning mode of education. Learning situation depends on the mode of delivery which the students feel is suitable for them at any point in time. The institutions with blended learning and convergence of approach in place do not need to provide any unnecessary space and are at liberty to enroll as many as they are ready to admit for their programmes as long as they meet their requirements.

Strategies for Implementing Blended Learning and Convergence Approaches in ODL Institutions

Before blended learning and convergence approaches can be properly implemented by any ODL institution, the three components of the teaching and learning approaches must be made readily available as follows:

- print materials should be available; that is, the course materials for all the courses under all the academic programmes the institution offers
- the provision for facilitations of courses of programmes on offer with the availability of qualified tutors who are the facilitators and
- the technological infrastructure and facilities-the hardware, which are the media for e- learning on one part and the e-content designed with bias for self-learning in the form of text, audio, video and animation of the courses for each programme on offer on the other hand, must be provided.

The above would follow the need assessment which must have been carried out *ab initio* for the purpose of the evaluation of the concerted efforts expended in order to confirm at every point of preparation the fact that what is required for the system to run smoothly are provided.

With the availability of the above, the unit that will give a technical support to the technological infrastructure and facilities provided must be made available to see to the oiling and management of the technology provided in order to forestall development of technical fault that could impede the e-learning process of the component of the blended and convergence approaches to learning at any point in time. Hence, the ICT unit must be made up of experts in information, communication and technology. They should be responsible for the uploading of the courseware, pre-view and testing of access and periodic assessment of the entire programme to ensure constant revisions and updating of materials. The life and management of whichever type of learning management system that is adopted lies in their hands and functionality including the management of the entire networking and software aspects of the technological infrastructure.

To complement the blended learning and convergence approach to teaching and learning in the ODL mode of education, very robust learner support services should be put in place. This unit must be well organised and made up of competent and qualified personnel as they will be into both offline and online counselling. It is this online counselling that will actually help remove the isolation the students who are deeply into e-learning could be confronted with in distance learning. It is the online counselling and other channels embedded in the technological infrastructure provided that these categories of students would rely on for interactions with their colleagues and staff of the university. Those that take to text-course materials would rely on the period of face-to-face facilitation that would help them instead of the e-learning aspect of the blended learning and convergence approach. The onus is on the qualified counselling psychologist to handle every encompassing problem that the students could encounter during the teaching and learning; be it offline or online.

In conclusion, it is recommended that ODL institutions should put the required infrastructure and facilities in place to empower and enhance their capability and capacity. This will facilitate the adoption of blended learning and the use of convergence approach for the purpose of reaching wide geographical areas in order to get the students who enrolled for various programmes in their borderless mode of education. This method and approach will also help them lay the foundation for offering education to

many unreached candidates who are yearning for education. Also, the method will enhance the process of teaching and learning without any student being locked-out or short-changed of the services that will make the institutions achieve their goals and objectives in the sub-Saharan Africa.

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