

Continuous Professional Development and Student Support in an Open and Distance E-Learning Institution: A Case Study

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Abstract

On-going technological developments and the diverse student population entering Higher Education in South Africa require that lecturers have the necessary skills to teach and support today's students. This article reports on a study that explored the experiences of academics at an open distance learning (ODL) institution that participated in a fully online teaching and learning programme at an international institution, through a partnership aimed at developing academic capacity in ODL. A case study methodology and a range of qualitative data collection tools were employed. The study revealed that the participants appreciated the support they received and value the skills acquired in the programme. They also indicated that they are planning to use these skills to enhance their teaching. Based on the findings, continuous professional development in distance education and e-learning is recommended in order to establish an efficient student support system.

Key words: continuous professional development (CPD), distance education, e-learning, student support, open and distance learning (ODL), transactional distance, community of inquiry (Coi)

Les développements technologiques en cours et la population étudiante diverse qui accède à l'Enseignement supérieur en Afrique du Sud nécessitent que les maîtres de conférence aient les compétences nécessaires pour enseigner et venir en aide à la population étudiante d'aujourd'hui. Cet article fait le compte-rendu d'une étude qui a analysé les expériences d'universitaires dans une institution de formation ouverte à distance (FOAD) qui ont par-

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ticipé à un programme d'enseignement et d'apprentissage intégralement en ligne proposé par une institution internationale, grâce à un partenariat qui a pour objectif de développer les capacités universitaires en FOAD. Cette étude, qui a utilisé une méthodologie de l'étude de cas et une panoplie d'outils de collecte de données qualitatives, a révélé que les participant·es ont apprécié le soutien qu'ils et elles ont reçu et accordent de l'importance aux compétences acquises dans le programme. Les participant·es ont aussi indiqué que ces compétences seraient intégrées dans leur enseignement. Il ressort donc de cette étude que la formation professionnelle continue dans la formation à distance et le télé-enseignement est recommandée afin d'établir un système efficace d'aide à la population étudiante.

Mots clés: développement professionnel continu (DPC), formation à distance, télé-enseignement, aide à la population étudiante, formation ouverte à distance (FOAD), distance transactionnelle, communauté d'apprentissage (CoA)

Introduction

Growing interest in more flexible learning and teaching modes and distance education (DE) at South African universities means that these institutions must equip themselves with the necessary skills. The challenges include the need to support and satisfy the demands of diverse student cohorts while producing a body of knowledge and contributing to relevant local and international scholarly research.

Academics cannot impart skills they themselves lack or facts they do not know to students. Central to successful curriculum reform and student achievement is the need for lecturers to engage in relevant continuous professional development (CPD). Mohammadyari and Singh (2015, p. 11) argue that an individual's "digital literacy has an impact on users' performance and effort expectations". Such literacy facilitates the use of e-learning technologies in teaching and learning. A significant body of literature (Fullan, 1994; Heinrich, 1995; So and Swatman, 2006; Wang, 2002) suggests that the way teachers teach is a product of their own schooling, training and experiences. So and Swatman (2006, p. 1) assert that it is "unfair to ask teachers to change their pedagogical approaches if they have not been given sufficient and appropriate training on how to integrate new ICT-based technologies in their teaching".

Institutions should thus embark on training programmes that are geared towards improving their offerings; the quality of their teaching and the employability of their students. For Parker and Freeth (cited in Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall, 2009, p. 450), "the consequent need for higher-level technical, professional and managerial skills increases demand for con-

tinuing professional development" in higher education (HE). Marshall and Pennington (cited in Fry et al., 2009, p. 486) maintain that "the nature, volume and scope of individual professional development for teaching is no longer a private matter, but it is now clearly in the public domain and subject to various forms of review and regulation". They argue that CPD for learning and teaching is increasingly underpinned by contractual requirements and the need to enhance the quality of teaching. Lifelong learning is no longer optional, but part of a nationally and globally recognised code of practice.

Fry et al. (2009) add that lifelong learning habits are an integral part of CPD. Reflection and reflective practice are required to enhance the personal practice of both lecturers and students.

The study's research question was: "How do continuous training and development of lecturers affect student support in an open and distance learning (ODL) and e-learning institution?". This article reflects on the lessons learnt and the experiences of delivering a master of distance education (MDE) programme as part of an international collaboration. The fully online programme is offered as part of the University of South Africa (Unisa)'s academic capacity-building initiative. The article draws on two pedagogical theories – Moore's theory of transaction distance and Garrison, Anderson and Archer's community of inquiry (Coi) theory.

Context of the Study

Provision of DE in South Africa calls for change and the adoption of technology in teaching and learning. Unisa responded by adopting e-learning as part of its ODL business model. Courses were introduced to run fully online as signature modules. Six modules were identified in each college and Unisa began the task of equipping relevant stakeholders in the university community with the skills required to teach and learn online. One of the initiatives was a collaboration between Unisa and the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) in the United States (US). A memorandum of understanding was signed to facilitate academic collaboration and the advancement of education and training at both institutions. This would be achieved by developing knowledge and skills related to the use of technology for teaching and learning, especially among teaching staff.

Gregory and Salmon (2013, p. 256) argue that the process of developing current staff to meet the needs of online or blended modes of teaching and learning needs to be "rapid, cost-effective and must lead directly to practical outcomes". Most institutions do not have the luxury of time to start from scratch or to test an online pedagogical model. Thus, the majority "adopt and adapt courses". This was the case with Unisa where six modules were chosen from six colleges as signature modules to be presented fully online

with a view to gradually adding modules as knowledge and experiences from the signature modules were shared.

Challenges of Distance and Online Education in Developing Countries

Higher education exists within an environment marked by considerable transformation, not only in this sector but also in the wider society and it is increasingly required to support a more diverse student body (Kirkwood and Price, 2006). According to Anderson and Garrison (1998), learning in a networked world presents many new roles and responsibilities for both the teacher and the learner and radically changes the construction and delivery of course content.

The innovative and emerging technologies used in an ODL and e-learning environment require institutions to adapt and adopt new modes of teaching and learning. Ngegebule, Molathegi, Tshaka and Mamadisa (2007) note that successful e-learning models rest on an institution's information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure, maximisation of student satisfaction and successful completion of students' studies.

Distance education has been recognised for its ability to open doors to large numbers of learners who would otherwise have no access to further education and training. However, Andrade (2014) asserts that open access enables more ill-prepared students to enter HE, adding to existing problems of retention and low pass rates. It is therefore crucial that support form an intentional, internal component of any course and that it is not regarded as an external or optional service.

Adopting a constructivist perspective, many scholars argue that humans generate knowledge and meaning from the interaction between their experiences and their ideas (Bruner, 2009; Dewey, 1938; Piaget, 1971; Vygotsky, 1980) and this has been the hallmark of adult education for many decades. Like many DE institutions, Unisa has recently welcomed an influx of younger-generation learners who enter the DE and e-learning arena directly from school. This presents new challenges that require DE institutions to revisit the learning and teaching theories that have guided academia for years and further highlights the need for learner support programmes.

Finally, while education institutions in developing countries are turning to international collaborations, especially for skills development and capacity building, Brum, and Knobel (2018) caution that context is very important.

Theoretical Framework

The Community of inquiry (Coi) theory developed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) and Moore's theory of transactional distance (1993) formed the theoretical framework for this study. The Coi framework comprises three interdependent and dynamic key elements; the social, the

cognitive and teaching presence. Founded on a collaborative constructivist view of teaching and learning, it suggests that in online and blended learning environments learning occurs within a community through the interaction of these core elements (Akyol, Garrison and Ozden, 2009). This framework has been widely adopted to inform the practice of DE and e-learning.

The Coi allows students to ask questions individually and offers a platform to collaborate, share ideas and find solutions in conjunction with other students in the same community (Akyol et al., 2009; Anderson and Dron, 2012). Palloff and Pratt (2007) note that creating and sustaining a learning community enhances student satisfaction and learning. The Coi theory emphasises *interactions* between the prime actors in DE – students, teachers and the content (Anderson, 2003; Garrison et al., 2000) – that are encouraged, facilitated and guided by lecturers and co-managed with students.

According to Moore (1993), there is some degree of transactional distance in any educational programme. Moore adds that physical separation leads to psychological and communication-related gaps – spaces for potential misunderstandings between the inputs of the instructor and those of the learner. Moore's theory of transactional distance comprises three sets of variables: dialogue, structure and learner autonomy.

These two pedagogical frameworks emphasise the importance of communication in any educational environment and the way in which engagement can be designed and executed to achieve the desired objective, namely, to instil critical thinking and help learners to achieve their learning goals.

In essence, a teaching presence in Coi is pivotal in reducing the gap between learner and teacher/ tutor (Moore's transactional distance); and a cognitive presence ensures that elements such as motivation, encouragement and feedback are present in any communication setup. Educators thus need to be made aware of their roles and the importance of mastering content and technical skills, especially in a digital era when technological tools are constantly changing the ways in which we learn and teach.

Motivation for and Significance of the Study

"The influx of technology into institutions of higher education has demanded changes to the traditional support structures at colleges and universities" (Amador and Amador, 2014, p. 1), especially in developing countries. Amador and Amador (2014) found that students use online social networks to ask for general help, but interact with HE personnel electronically regarding academic matters.

These and many other changes require reflection on, and debate around the required skills and expectations of academics in HE, particularly those

offering DE and e-learning in developing countries. Teaching online brings both challenges and opportunities. Although this study is of relatively limited scope, it offers useful insights into how CPD can help institutions enhance their student support services and identifies opportunities for further research into online education delivery in HE in developing countries.

Research Aim and Objectives

The overall aim of this study was to explore how lecturers' skills, knowledge and experience in e-learning affect student support in an ODL and e-learning (ODEL) institution. It investigated how lecturers' proficiency in ICT skills can affect student support in online education and how their e-learning experiences affect their approach to teaching and supporting students in an ODL institution.

Methodology

The study adopted an interpretivist philosophy, which was appropriate to explore the subject matter as experienced in its natural setting (De Vos, Delport, Fouché, and Strydom, 2011, p. 309). It was important that the research engage with participants in the UMUC/Unisa capacity building programme to understand how the newly acquired skills were being implemented and how they affected the way the candidates approached their own teaching, especially in supporting their learners at Unisa.

A qualitative research methodology was selected to better understand and logically interpret the subject matter. (De Vos et al, 2011, p. 321). Multiple triangulation data collection methods and tools were used that are compatible with qualitative studies.

A case study research design was considered appropriate as such a design enables researchers to immerse themselves in the dynamics of a single case to uncover events that can easily be missed with superficial methods (Erickson, 1985). It also facilitates understanding of phenomena through the participants' interpretation of their experiences within their own context (Runeson and Höst, 2009). Although case studies are known to have lack of "generalisability" (Tsang, 2014), triangulation enabled the researcher to gain deep insights into staff training and development and how this impacted on their practice.

The target population was the 60 Unisa academic staff members who participated in the capacity building programme and partnership with the UMUC between 2013 and 2015. Non-probability purposive sampling was used to select the sample. Purposive sampling was employed to identify the ten participants for the interviews and the remaining 50 participants were invited to complete the questionnaire, which was administered online via

the Lime Survey platform. The sample included those who had successfully completed the programme; those who did not; those who were progressing in the programme and those who had just started it.

Another set of data was sampled from the discussion forums of the two modules of the MEd. in ODL; that is, ODL592 and ODL594 offered at Unisa. Access to discussions on Unisa's learning management system (LMS), myUnisa, was obtained through the relevant ethical bodies at the university.

Data was collected using multiple methods, including interviews with six of the 10 participants selected, an open-ended online questionnaire administered to the remaining 50 participants, and secondary data from online discussion forums from the university's LMS, myUnisa. An average of 600 posts from each module were collected. The design and development of questions in the interview schedule and the questionnaire were based on the relevant literature and driven by the research questions, aims and objectives.

Deductive thematic analysis was used to code the data. Thematic analysis codes were identified by highlighting and underlining significant words, phrases and paragraphs (quotes or passages) that stood out (Creswell, 2013, p. 205). All six transcribed interviews were put together in one document and grouped. This assisted in finding consensus or differences among participants on similar issues; or any outstanding and/or interesting occurrences in the data.

The responses to the questionnaire and data from the discussion forums were exported to Microsoft Word and were then cleaned and transferred to the Atlas.ti software package for in-depth analysis.

The themes that emerged from the coded data were:

1. Facilitation and management of teaching and learning in an online programme.
2. Student support strategies for learning and successful completion of a course in ODeL.
3. Lecturer attitudes, subject mastery and technology skills and their impact on teaching and learning in ODeL.

Results

The interviews and the questionnaire were designed to elicit data on the participants' experience and perceptions of an online learning programme; and how this affected the way they approached teaching and supporting their students. The data from the discussion forums yielded information about the type of support students requested from their lecturers in the identified modules. It is important to note that the data revealed attitudes and perceptions about participants both as lecturers and as learners.

Some codes came out strongly in all the types of data, with varying descriptors (see Table 1). For example, empathy was one of the descriptors most often used in relation to student support. Workload was most often used to describe the participants' experience of the online programme/course structure and staff training was married with attitude and the use of technology in teaching and learning.

Table 1. A Sample of Codes and Categories (Descriptors)

Student Support
<i>Empathy</i> , understanding, support, putting myself in the students' shoes, engaging, online readiness, group work, the attitude of lecturers/instructors, approach/preferences of lecturers/instructors, loneliness, interaction, helpful instructors, motivation, confidence, intimidated and relaxed.
Programme/Course Structure
Pace, semester system, rubric, assessment (continuous, transparent, integrated), grades, workload, assignment due dates/schedule, discussion forums, group work, facilitation, feedback (detailed, timely), turnaround time, intensive, interaction, concrete outcomes, weekly outcomes/assessments, due date extension, module resources, peer review, student orientation, enrolment advisors, culture of teaching, culture of learning, built-in support, LMS, manageable, double job, true flavour, technologies, skills, manipulation, multimedia, course design and management, choices, decision-making and computer literacy. <i>Workload</i> , tiring, hectic, exhausting, frustrating, intensive, pressure, overwhelming, fast-paced, stressful, sleepless nights, challenging, deadlines too close, too much work, too much reading for the weekly discussions, time zones, semester system, outdated readings, stupid, crazy, tough, daunting, demanding and inconsistencies.
Staff Training
Attitude, professional development, skills development, computer literacy, online readiness, presentation skills, facilitation, critical self-evaluation, educational technology and content/subject mastery.

Theme 1: Facilitation and Management of Teaching and Learning in an Online Programme

This theme related to how the participants experienced overall facilitation of teaching and learning on both the UMUC and Unisa LMSs and how this affected their own learning experience as learners and their work.

Most participants indicated that they strongly considered implementing some of the skills and tools they had learnt from the UMUC-Unisa programme. They indicated that they would consider "engaging students and building online student communities" in their teaching as this positively impacted their own learning during this programme.

Asked which part(s) of the student support practices that they experienced in the programme they would consider implementing in their own online teaching, most participants mentioned the inclusion of readily available information resources such as e-books, journal articles, website links, open educational resources and so forth. These were also rated highly in terms of facilitating learning and supporting students in distance and e-learning environments.

Most participants had similar perceptions of the UMUC programme's major strengths, which they felt helped them enjoy and successfully complete their learning journey. The following comments are taken from the interviews and questionnaires:

"The faculty seems competent, knowledgeable and skilled as instructors."

"Student support services were available 24 hours a day."

"Online discussions were properly designed and well-managed, and the technology teaching and learning tools used were relevant and appropriate."

"Online self-help tools were user-friendly"

There were major differences in the design of discussion forums and the way instructors from the two institutions facilitated these. Many participants indicated that they enjoyed the way the UMUC discussion forums were laid out and facilitated. Some believed this encouraged critical thinking and vigorous discussions and debates on key topics. However, Unisa's LMS discussion forum designs were seen as disempowering and frustrating. The following comments were drawn from the discussion forums collected from Unisa's LMS:

"Dear Lecturer, just to let you know that myUnisa has been unstable for the last week; it keeps bombing out and I have lost a longish post which I will try to re-create."

"Dear colleagues, is anyone having problems with the study material PDF failing to load?"

"I just experienced myUnisa surge, bouncing while I was posting something, but luckily I normally draft on MSWord first, so I just copied and pasted onto the discussion forum. Is there any way the discussion threads can be displayed LOGICALLY, like each reply be displayed under the relevant post, the current display is confusing and really not nice, much appreciated!"

Other participants had the same experience. However, the frustrations shared by some participants suggest that this is not only an issue of design or facilitation:

"Dear All, I agree with XX that the current myUnisa discussion forums are not very effective with my undergraduate students...if

it is not graded, it is not done. However, forced conversations are not conducive either.”

“I have tried various ways to encourage participation, such as opening discussions on concepts that seems to be difficult (or vague) in the study guide – no response. Then I tried ‘bribing’ them by stating that a certain topic is really important for the exam and necessitates a discussion – none of my 250 students responded. Although, there will be many complaints after the exam...”

The major difference between the two institutions is that Unisa deals with large numbers of students in discussion forums, with a minimum of 100 students in a group; whereas UMUC has about 20 students in a group. This is a major challenge for Unisa.

Theme 2: Student Support Strategies for Learning and Successful Completion of a Course in ODeL

This theme related to the support strategies that both institutions offered as experienced by the participants; how they affected their attitudes towards online education; student support in DE and e-learning; and how they planned to implement the skills they acquired through this capacity-building partnership in their own work.

Most participants reported that there was excellent support throughout the UMUC programme with a few reporting the same for the Unisa (Med.) programme. Administrative and academic support was said to be good at all times from both UMUC and Unisa.

Student Support Approaches

From the list of codes in Table 1, it is evident that student support needs to be integrated in the entire online programme/course design. The list also reveals the importance of an understanding and empathetic approach in DE and e-learning for student support in developing countries.

Asked to reflect on their learning experience through the UMUC online programme, the terms that participants used included codes which were categorised under the term ‘student support’, as they speak to the heart of the student support approach to DE and e-learning students:

Empathy, understanding, support, putting myself in the students’ shoes, engaging, online readiness, group work, attitude of lecturers/instructors, approach/preferences of lecturers/instructors, loneliness, interaction, helpful instructors, motivation, confidence, intimidated, relaxed and so forth.

Most participants indicated that they were more empathetic in their approach after they enrolled for the UMUC programme and that they

understood their students’ predicament of being a DE student better. As one participant highlighted:

“...when you design modules, you need to understand the situation of the student and you need to find ways of intervening, empathising with their position.”

The attitudes of some lecturers/instructors from UMUC were seen as disabling and demotivating, but the overall feeling was that the instructions of most lecturers/instructors were helpful and understanding. Even though there was a high rate of dissatisfaction with the workload in the programme, it seems that the support structure and design were integrated into the system, thereby promoting the success of the students and the programme.

The participants also indicated that when asking for information or help, they always approached their lecturers first. Some noted that they received help and relevant information from their fellow students in the ‘class’ or study group. This highlights the importance of instructor-student interaction and instructor visibility and presence in the DE and online environment.

Assessment Strategies and Feedback

The use of rubrics, feedback approaches and mechanisms, marking and general assessment strategies were rated as important in ensuring success for students in DE and e-learning.

Most participants believed that the turnaround time for feedback was very good and encouraging; and feedback was reported to have been thorough and detailed, with the thorough use of rubrics. UMUC writing coaches were singled out as very helpful and motivating and thus, effective in ensuring successful completion of the online studies. This strategy ensured that the learners did not plagiarise because the writing coaches advised on necessary improvements before their work was submitted for marking.

While there was an outcry about the standard of marking in the UMUC programme, most participants indicated that the rubrics prepared them for what was expected and encouraged them to aim higher. Some compared the marking systems of the two institutions and reported that while one institution’s standard was high and stressful, it forced students to learn with understanding, whereas the low marking system of the other institution only enabled students to learn enough to pass the modules. The pass rate at UMUC was 80% and above while that at Unisa was a mere 50%.

Transparency was most appreciated by the participants. Receiving their learning objectives, assessment expectations and rubrics at the beginning of the course/module was considered helpful and effective, as indicated by one participant:

“The one thing that I thought was vastly different was the assessment, which always came with a rubric and it was strictly applied so you always knew how much you were going to get if you followed the rubric and if you made sure you looked at the rubric before you submit you were most likely to get 90% or above, which is very rare here. I think lecturers still don’t know how to use rubrics; there are very few of them who use rubrics and those who use rubrics sometimes don’t share the rubrics with the students upfront.”

No concerns were raised regarding the assessment strategies in the Unisa section. However, it was stated that the marking should be improved to encourage high performance and excellent marks.

Theme 3: Lecturer Attitudes, Subject Mastery and Technology Skills and the Impact on Teaching and Learning in ODeL

This theme entailed how the lecturers’ skills, competency and attitudes towards e-learning affected their teaching and learning. It was reported that one of the major strengths of the UMUC programme was faculty’s competence, knowledge and skills. Most participants indicated that the online discussions were properly facilitated and well-managed. Some reported that the technology teaching and learning tools used in the programme were relevant and appropriate, highlighting the important role that instructors play in teaching and learning at a distance and online.

Most participants reported that they achieved the learning goals of the programme. While there is clearly room for improvement, such achievement can be attributed to the quality of teaching and facilitation of learning within the programme. A few participants raised an interesting point regarding facilitation versus teaching:

Respondent 1

“I don’t think there was much teaching at UMUC to be honest with you, they allowed you to find your way. They facilitated the learning for you and they just gave you guidelines and pointers as to where you should go, what you should look for, there wasn’t any teaching in the real sense and then you would come back and share your learning guide. Of course, they would say this is what we expected you to go look for.”

Respondent 2

“Unisa lecturers also need to facilitate and sit more or less in the background and watch learning unfold without leading the students from the front but leading them from behind and trust the students. In the UMUC programme we were never told anything, we were told to find things ourselves and here are the questions, go and read this article and answer these questions.”

While some participants preferred to be taught by their instructors, others were happy to learn from other students and to share their own knowledge and display skills, using technology within the classroom and/or in group projects. Student-student interactions are also important in online teaching, as students may transfer invisible features or their cultures and information learnt from interacting with various groups; knowledge that the instructor would not have imparted.

Most Unisa lecturers who participated in the study believed that “all Unisa academics should enrol for this programme”. See the remarks below:

Remarks from the Questionnaire

“The programme provides the necessary knowledge and skills for ODL and online teaching and learning. I recommend that academic staff at UNISA be encouraged to register for the programme.”

“This course must be made compulsory to every lecturing staff especially those coming from contact institutions.”

“Unisa MEd facilitators must also register for the UMUC leg of the programme.”

Remarks from the Interviews

“I think every single UNISA lecturer should be forced to take an online course and secondly, it really opened my mind to the possibilities of different ways of teaching [from] ... contact teaching.”

“... maybe some of them have been here 20 years or so and don’t even remember any other way of doing it.”

“I wish all UNISA staff members can do this course; it is worth doing.”

Below are some of the learning objectives from the Unisa-UMUC partnership programme that the participants said they had benefited from:

- Analyse the range of technologies used in the design, delivery, management and support of DE.
- Appropriately select generic technologies that support teaching and learning.
- Use information ethically and legally by properly citing their materials in the correct format.
- Learn collaboratively by using social media and other shared virtual spaces to create content and successfully complete assigned tasks.
- Navigate and use an online learning environment, shared virtual spaces and social media for the purpose of learning, documenting learning and creating content.

This partnership programme brought serious learning and personal reflections to each of the participants. It was also evident that academ-

ics need to learn, unlearn and relearn and be equipped with the relevant knowledge and skills in order to remain competent in the workplace and effective in their teaching and learning in an ever-changing technological era. Skills such as facilitation of learning, management of online discussions and group work are necessary for holistic learning and support of students to ensure successful completion and address the global challenge of student retention.

Discussion

The overall aim of this study was to explore how lecturers' skills, knowledge and experience in e-learning affect student support in an ODL and e-learning institution. The study focused on CPD through an international partnership aimed at developing academic capacity in ODeL.

Shenton (2004) cautions that qualitative research results must be understood within the context of the particular characteristics of the institution. The study's results should thus be understood within the context of Unisa staff undertaking professional development through an external international institution as well as an internal learning process. The findings are therefore not necessarily generalisable to other contexts, although, as noted, there is a strong correlation with other related studies. The findings may, however, be distributed to the wider Unisa community to further enhance academics' skills in teaching and learning online.

Most participants indicated that they chose to enrol for the UMUC certificate for reasons of personal interest and development, while others wanted to improve the quality of online teaching in their departments. All the participants rejected the suggestion that their decision to enrol was suggested and/or instructed by their line managers.

Theme 1: Facilitation and Management of Teaching and Learning in an Online Programme

While the design of the LMS affects the smooth running of the course, it also affects the work of lecturers and facilitation of teaching and learning. If academics do not have the relevant skills and knowledge, they may not function optimally and therefore may also not have much support to offer students.

Overall Course Design and Structure

The importance of pace; assignment due dates; the use of rubrics; turnaround time for feedback; built-in support and appropriate assessment strategies was evident in the discussions. The UMUC programme workload and pace were highly criticised by the Unisa staff that enrolled for the programme. However, this was also seen as positive as many participants

indicated that it helped them to focus and produce quality work. It was also found that facilitation skills have a major impact on students' successful completion of online studies. This was a learning curve for many Unisa academics who participated in the study.

Learning Management Systems

The design of discussion forums can be inhibitory and sometimes cause confusion and/or misunderstanding. A well-designed and managed discussion forum will ensure effective facilitation of interaction in DE and e-learning, which is a necessary element to close the gap between learners and teachers (Akyol et al., 2009; Anderson, 2003; Garrison et al., 2000; Moore, 1993).

Theme 2: Student Support Strategies for Learning and Successful Completion of a Course in ODeL

The premise that educators cannot impart to students what they themselves do not possess was supported as most participants indicated that they had a better understanding of the predicament faced by students in studying through the distance learning and e-learning mode of delivery.

Most also stated that the experience of being online learning students had affected them as ODL educators and they intended to be more empathetic towards their own students. While this does not mean that the participants were not initially empathetic, most pointed to the empathetic support they received from UMUC staff as motivation to adopt a more empathetic approach in future.

Instructors were identified as the primary source of support for students followed by other students and other colleagues for those participants in the same programme. Holmberg (2006) maintains that empathy helps DE learners to feel less isolated, thus, helping to motivate them. According to Holmberg (2006), a friendly atmosphere is an essential component of the interaction between students and instructors/tutors, since helping and teaching students is the main purpose of such engagement. If lecturers embrace an empathetic approach in DE, the outcomes of students' learning experiences are likely to improve (Holmberg, 2006).

Theme 3: Lecturer Attitudes, Subject Mastery and Technology Skills and the Impact on Teaching and Learning in ODeL

Issues relating to instructors'/lecturers' personalities, attitudes, preferences, presentation styles, presence and skills were of serious concern to the participants.

Mafenya (2013, p. 354) found that most of the Unisa students he interviewed did not have much confidence in their ability to use e-learning tools.

He noted that “students and faculty did not get enough training on how to use” Unisa’s LMS. If lecturers are not well-prepared for the e-learning mode of teaching, an institution may find itself failing. From a managerial point of view, the participants in Olson, Cohn and Carlson’s (2000) study felt that a lack of technical support staff, suitable support materials, hardware and software support can be costly.

According to Yorke (1999), the quality and quantity of both the student and the instructor’s involvement with the aim of achieving specific outcomes are motivated by a variety of factors. While the student may be motivated by the desire to learn and/or obtain a qualification, “the quality and quantity of involvement from the instructor may come from the passion to teach, institutional expectations and contract, and most importantly from the confidence built over time through the acquired knowledge and skills in the field”. Yorke (1999) argues that a lack of up-to-date knowledge (of content) and skills (in using the available tools) to teach students, may negatively affect instructors’ confidence, thereby undermining the quality and quantity of their involvement, which is especially crucial in ODL and e-learning contexts.

The study found that one of the most important ingredients in the success of DE and e-learning is educators’ skills and basic knowledge of how to use educational technologies to learn and teach. Bates (2015) notes that “most knowledge-based activities depend heavily on the use of technology”, especially in the digital era in which universities operate. Although skills can be learnt by trial and error, Bates (2015) asserts that skills development can be greatly enhanced by appropriate interventions that are relevant, properly planned and designed to meet users’ needs.

Educators’ proficiency in ICT was rated higher than subject mastery, as most participants believed that they learnt more from their peers and other students during discussions and outside the ‘classroom’ than they learnt directly from teachers. This could mean that the teachers mainly presented the learning objectives and tasks and facilitated discussions, and thus learning. It could be that most new learning comes through structured discussions of authentic artefacts and publications; facilitating this engagement has become the primary role of the online teacher rather than delivering content through, for example, a video lecture. Educators’ proficiency in ICT skills is thus necessary for adopting effective student support practices for online teaching and learning in DE and e-learning.

Fry et al. (2009) believe that lifelong learning habits encompass CPD and suggest that professional development programmes enhance the student experience. They also believe that it is necessary “to maintain currency, expand the skills base and keep abreast of new developments in the field” (Fry et al., 2009). Van den Berg et al. (2015) examined an

international partnership to develop academic capacity in ODL and found that after completing the programme, nearly all the participants suggested that all faculty should participate in it to prepare them for teaching online. They also indicated that they gained theoretical and practical knowledge that they would use confidently in teaching and supporting students. Chetty (2014) and Holomisa and Dube (2014) also found that academics’ ICT skills are necessary for effective teaching and learning in the ODeL model in Unisa.

Conclusion

This study employed Moore’s transactional distance theory and Garrison, Anderson and Archer’s Coi to examine the importance of relevant ICT skills for teaching and learning in DE and e-learning.

A lack of facilitation skills on the part of a lecturer can negatively impact learner outcomes. The three sets of variables in Moore’s theory of transactional distance – dialogue, structure and learner autonomy – need to be intertwined in the design and delivery of DE and e-learning to support learners to achieve their learning goals.

While transactional distance and Coi are student-centred theories, they place strong emphasis on the role of the teacher/educator/tutor. It is therefore important that lecturers master not only content, but also technical skills, especially in the digital era when technological tools are constantly changing the ways in which we learn and teach.

This study’s findings suggest that educational institutions, especially in DE and e-learning environments, that offer relevant support to their academic staff members will reap the benefits of well-supported students and increased successful completion of studies. Most participants reported that they had a better understanding of the support needed by students because of the kind of support they received from their instructors in the Unisa-UMUC programme. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

- A university-wide in-depth study to assess academic staff’s readiness, and a relevant skills development plan and support system for academics and support staff.
- Staff members that complete formal e-learning training programme need to be strategically co-opted in research, discussions and projects within the university where the acquired skills can be immediately put to use.
- A platform should be created for staff members that complete a training programme to share information and their experiences to ensure that their knowledge is put to use for smooth e-learning implementation.

In order to address the problem of low student retention and high dropout rates, today's educators need to acquire skills to provide relevant support to learners. These include the technical and pedagogical skills required to teach at a distance and/or online. Educators should thus continuously equip themselves with such skills.

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