

Learner Support in Open Distance and E-Learning Context through Teaching Presence of Community of Inquiry Model

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ABSTRACT The recent global growth and popularity of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has been attributed to its advantages, such as flexibility for students who wish to study while working. Moreover, ODL is an effective tool in extending participation to students from less privileged social groups who are unreachable due to their geographic location or cannot access higher education because of diverse factors, such as financial constraints or domestic arrangements. In the light of this, this paper investigated learner support in the Department of Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) at the University of South Africa (Unisa), the largest dedicated ODL institution in South Africa. A review of the literature identified the Community of Inquiry model is useful in this context, and it was used as a conceptual framework for the empirical inquiry. A quantitative research approach was employed to investigate the research questions.

INTRODUCTION

Open Distance and Learning (ODL) researchers argue that it is important for research to have a basis in theory. Peters (2006) urges distance education professionals to approach their work or research in a scientific way and emphasises that research must be done theoretically in order for distance education reform to occur. This author cites Evans and Nation (1992), who argue that “the problem for those of us involved in the field is not just how we keep up with new practices, but also how to theorize these changes in ways which help us understand the broader social and historical contexts through which ODL is transformed”. Therefore it was important to frame the study project within particular theoretical contexts. The theoretical framework assisted the researcher to formulate the instrument for data collection. In the rest of this section the work of the distance education scholars and their views on theoretical framework are discussed.

The early and influential scholars of distance education, Holmberg, Moore and Peters, stress the importance of theory in research to inform practice in teaching and learning. Research without theory seems to be a meaningless exercise. The literature reviewed above laid the foundation for the theory of online Community of Inquiry (CoI), on which the instrument used to collect the data was based. The CoI is an e-learn-

ing theoretical framework and it is student-centered. It proposes that successful learning takes place when there are three presences in a class - social, teaching and cognitive presences (Garrison et al. 2000). The paper focused on the teaching presence of the model.

One of the key challenges in distance education is that students are separated from the institution and their peers. For this reason, access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) at Unisa and even elsewhere in the world is critical in creating an online learning environment that is conducive to active engagement.

The three presences of Community of Inquiry relate well with some functions of the myUnisa tool. The model also emphasizes the needs for online learners to be able to address the challenge of projecting themselves as real people like in discussion forums of myUnisa.

The discussion forum in myUnisa is a tool intended to provide a forum for engagement among students, as well as between students and lecturers (Mbatha and Naidoo 2010: 175).

Garrison (2009) defines social presence as, the ability of participants to identify with the community and the course of study, while communicating purposefully in a trusting environment and developing interpersonal relationships by way of presenting their individual perspectives. To Greyling and Wentzel (2007: 654), social presence can be described as the ability of

students to project themselves as real people in an online community. According to Gunawardena (1995) and van Tryon and Bishop (2009: 292), social presence was originally conceived of as the number of communication channel affordances in mediated communication and evolved in recent literature to include students' perception of the presence of another in an online learning environment. Garrison et al. (2000: 89) further define social presence as the ability of participants in the CoI to project their personal characteristics to the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as real people.

Thus the concept of social presence involves participants who communicate purposefully in a particular environment (Garrison et al. 2001). According to Biocca et al. (2003: 474), the focus of social presence must remain fundamentally a theory of how technology mediates social interaction. Computer-mediated communication inherent in the online learning environment provides new avenues for learners, through which they can achieve social perception as they negotiate the social encounters they experience there. Garrison et al. (2000: 89) also emphasize that social presence is necessary to sustain a critical community of online learners. Social presence brings together lecturers and students; however, it depends on the quality of the communication exchange (Kehrwald 2007) since it is derived from the interpretation of the conveyed messages during interaction (Tu and McIsaac 2002; Kehrwald 2007).

In its articulation of social presence, the CoI model also emphasizes the need for online learners to be able to address the challenge of projecting themselves as real people. According to Aragon (2003, in Stodel et al. 2006: 2), some believe that social presence is one of the first components that must be established to initiate learning online. Stodel et al. (2006: 2) see the purpose of an educational experience as more than the development of a social community. The goal is to achieve defined learning outcomes and promote cognitive development. Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) argue that if learning is to occur, interactions must be structured and systematic, rather than loose and social, and a CoI must be developed. Moller (1998: 120) says that by learning about the frustrations of others, the learner will likely understand that these feelings are typical and not abnormal, and thus

will be able to continue to work toward the educational goal.

In the words of Mbatha and Naidoo (2010: 175) student support at Unisa is mediated by technology that reaches even students in rural areas. The discussion forum in myUnisa, the student portal, is intended to facilitate engagement among students, as well as between students and lecturers. The three presences of CoI relate well to some functions of myUnisa.

METHODOLOGY

The questionnaire was compiled after a thorough review of the literature to identify all the variables to be included in the paper. It was framed using the CoI framework, which focuses on the intentional development of an online learning community with an emphasis on the process of instructional conversations that are likely to lead to epistemic engagement. The researcher carried out a random sample of 400 students ($n=400$) from a total number of 1,808 students enrolled in the Higher Diploma in Adult Basic Education and Training at Unisa. A quantitative research approach was employed to investigate the research questions. Ice (2009) argues that the CoI framework has been successful in measuring the quality of both fully online and blended courses. The language used in the instrument was English, which is the language commonly used for teaching and learning at Unisa.

RESULTS

The interpretation of the Cronbach alpha coefficients is briefly provided in the discussion of the analysis results. Since a Cronbach alpha coefficient in the region of 0,7 and greater (0,941) is indicative of internal consistency, it can therefore be concluded that the constructs in the survey questionnaire could be deemed reliable.

Data Analysis

Table 1 indicates that most respondents agree (51%), and 17.5 percent strongly agree, that the lecturer clearly communicated important module topics to them. However, some respondents disagree (29%) that important topics were communicated on myUnisa.

Table 1: myUnisa: Teaching Presence

myUnisa: Teaching Presence Please indicate the extent of your agreement with each of the following statements by ticking the appropriate box.

1: *Strongly Disagree*

2: *Disagree*

3: *Agree*

4: *Strongly Agree*

| | <i>Statement</i> | <i>1</i> | <i>2</i> | <i>3</i> | <i>4</i> |
|-----|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| 1. | On myUnisa the lecturer clearly communicated important module topics. | 13.2 | 14.8 | 51.0 | 17.5 |
| 2. | On myUnisa the lecturer clearly communicated important module goals. | 13.2 | 15.6 | 51.4 | 16.3 |
| 3. | On myUnisa the lecturer clearly communicated important due dates as a study guide schedule | 12.8 | 17.1 | 43.2 | 23.3 |
| 4. | The lecturer provided clear instructions on how to participate in module learning activities on myUnisa. | 16.3 | 12.5 | 47.1 | 21.4 |
| 5. | The lecturer assisted the development of my creative thinking by indicating areas of agreement and disagreement on module topics. | 17.1 | 14.8 | 49.4 | 16.0 |
| 6. | The lecturer guided the class online on myUnisa to develop insight in understanding modules. | 18.7 | 24.9 | 38.5 | 15.2 |
| 7. | The lecturer assisted module participants through participative engagement towards productive dialogue. | 16.0 | 23.0 | 47.9 | 10.1 |
| 8. | The lecturer helped keep the module participants on track through focused learning. | 13.6 | 16.0 | 47.5 | 19.1 |
| 9. | The lecturer encouraged module participants on myUnisa to explore new concepts presented in the module. | 17.1 | 16.7 | 44.7 | 18.3 |
| 10. | On the myUnisa portal the actions of the lecturer reinforced a sense of community among the students. | 14.8 | 22.6 | 43.6 | 15.2 |
| 11. | By means of focused discussions on myUnisa, the lecturer facilitated learning. | 15.2 | 19.8 | 45.9 | 15.6 |
| 12. | The lecturer provided feedback that helped me understand my strengths and weaknesses. | 13.2 | 14.0 | 43.2 | 26.1 |

The majority of respondents (51.4%) agree, and 16.3 percent strongly agree, that module goals in myUnisa were clearly communicated to them by the lecturer. However, some respondents (13.2%) disagree, and 15.6 percent strongly disagree, that the lecturer clearly communicated module goals to them.

The majority (43.2%) of the respondents agreed, 23.3 percent strongly agreed, that the lecturer clearly communicated due dates to them. However, some respondents (17.1%) disagreed and 12.8 percent strongly disagreed about effective communication of the due dates. Most respondents (47.1%) agreed, and 21.4 percent strongly agreed, that the lecturer provided clear instructions on how to participate in module learning activities on myUnisa. Only 12.5 percent disagreed and 16.3 percent strongly disagreed that the lecturer provided clear instructions on myUnisa learning activities.

Over half the respondents (49.4%) agreed, and 16 percent strongly agreed, that the lecturer stimulated development of creative thinking through module topics. Only 14.8 percent dis-

agreed, and 17.1 percent strongly disagreed, that lecturers developed creative thinking.

The majority (49.9%) of the respondents agreed, and 10.1 percent strongly agreed, that the lecturer assisted them through participative engagement in productive dialogue. However, some respondents (23%) disagreed and 16 percent strongly disagreed about the lecturer's assistance in participative dialogue.

Most respondents (47.5%) agreed, and 19.1 percent strongly agreed, that they were sufficiently helped by lecturers to achieve focused learning; 16.6 percent of the respondents disagreed and 29 percent strongly disagreed that they were sufficiently helped to achieve focused learning.

The majority of respondents (44.7%) agreed, and 18.3 percent strongly agreed, that the lecturer encouraged the exploration of new concepts presented in the module. However, some respondents (16.7%) disagreed, and 17.1 percent strongly disagreed, about the lecturer's encouragement of new concept exploration.

The majority of respondents (43.6%) agreed, and 15.2 percent strongly agreed, that the lec-

turer reinforced a sense of community through the myUnisa portal, while some respondents (22.6%) disagreed, and 14.8 percent strongly disagreed, about the lecturer reinforcing a sense of community.

Most respondents (45.9%) agreed, and 15.6 percent strongly agreed, about the facilitation of focused discussions on myUnisa. However, some respondents (19.8%) disagreed, and 15.2 percent strongly disagreed, about the facilitation of sufficient discussion on myUnisa.

Most respondents agreed (43.2%), and 26.1 percent strongly agreed, about lecturer feedback concerning students' strengths and weaknesses, while a small percentage of respondents disagreed (14%) to strongly disagreed (13.3%) about lecturer feedback.

The students mainly use myUnisa for downloading learning materials. This clearly shows that the students are not using myUnisa the way it is supposed to be used. Most students cited lack of communication between the students and the lecturers. This could also be because most students are in rural areas where communications are mostly poor, for example, unreliable internet access, postal delays, network problems for cellular phones, etc. Most Unisa learner support systems are in the cities and far away from the students in the rural areas.

Anderson (2008) argues that understanding the students' prerequisite knowledge, their learning environment and their cultural attributes are starting points in the development of student-centred services. Unisa's learner support systems were established to be learner-centred and to reduce the distance between the students and the lecturers. The students enrolled at Unisa come from different socio-economic backgrounds and from both rural and urban areas (Table 1). The teaching and learning resources in the rural areas are generally of a lower standard than the resources in urban areas; however, Unisa's teaching methods can reach students in urban, semi-urban and rural areas. One thing that emerges is that the students do not have a clear picture of the different functions of myUnisa; it is mainly used for downloading and sending emails, checking assignment results, etc. The students use their cellphones or mobile technology to communicate with the lecturers, which suggests that students need training on the use of myUnisa.

However, the students who have access to myUnisa seem happy about this learning management tool. The myUnisa is mainly used for downloading and sending emails (Table 1). The students do not have a clear picture of the different functions of myUnisa. The students use myUnisa to check assignment results, etc. This suggests that training of students on myUnisa is lacking.

What really stands out is the clear communication experienced on the myUnisa portal between the students and the lecturers. The majority of the students (68.5%) view communication between the students and the lecturers as good.

Therefore, the students use their cell phones or mobile technologies to communicate with the lecturers. The majority of the students in the survey have good communication platforms with the lecturers. The students are using technologies for learning. Unisa is an ODL institution that functions within an environment in which students are living at various geographical distances from Muckleneuk, where the main campus is based. The students enrolled at the university come from different socio-economic backgrounds and also rural and urban areas (Table 1). The teaching and learning resources in the rural areas are generally of a low standard as compared with the resources in urban areas. The method of teaching can, however, reach diverse students from urban, semi-urban and rural areas.

The ABET students come from diverse backgrounds and are mainly scattered in the remote rural areas of the nine provinces of South Africa. The ABET Department assumes that when students enter higher education, they must have completed their general education. There is also an assumption that students come from backgrounds that equip them with the skills they need to adjust comfortably to the university environment (McInnis 2001). Makoe (2005: 45) reveals that most of Unisa's African students come from homes where they are first-generation learners in higher education. Furthermore, they come from schools that are poorly resourced, and as a result they are not adequately prepared for higher education. Yet, when these students enter higher education, they are expected to learn in a complex new environment. The ABET students can only be supported if lecturers understand their situation. This view is supported by Van Heerden (1997) the social, cultural, economic and

political environment in which learners grow up contributes considerably to their approach and performance in their academic arena.

CONCLUSION

The majority of the respondents who completed the questionnaire are Africans and most are women. Most respondents are working full-time or part-time and do not have access to the internet. The reliability coefficient of the teaching presence and student support systems in the ABET Department is very high.

The new communication technologies, particularly the internet, appear to offer exciting possibilities for overcoming geographical distance and cost barriers to learning. The introduction of ODL has been generally understood as a response to the new challenges of increased and diverse demands on supportive learning made on the educational sector. The distance education offered in developing countries has depended largely on first- and second-generation delivery modes and has relied heavily on print as a form of information dissemination. The technological challenges are often cited as the main reasons for such drawbacks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this paper, one must note that the implementation of technology in undergraduate courses to facilitate learning is an important part of the ODL learning process and ABET students should be encouraged to make use of technology as part of their learning experience.

The participants feel that they should be trained to use the different aspects of myUnisa. Their workload should be reduced so that they can have more time to focus on training their students on how to use myUnisa. They have also recommended that using myUnisa should be made compulsory for every student and they should be encouraged to visit internet cafes to obtain a picture of what myUnisa is. They have also realized that everything is moving towards technology, which perhaps might work if students could gain access to it on their cell phones.

In general, participants believe that technology has a role to play in promoting teaching and

learning in the Department. Although technologies can assist in facilitating communication between institution and students and among students themselves, they should not underestimate the inherent possibilities for effective support present in the communities from which the students come. Alternative resources and support in the students' respective communities can be investigated and harnessed to assist students in their endeavors.

It was clear that the use of e-learning at Unisa is fairly new to the lecturers, and some of them do not have a comprehensive understanding of what e-learning or online learning is. This is an issue that Unisa should be aware of. If lecturers do not have a good grasp of what e-learning or online learning is all about, perhaps it is premature for us to expect that the lecturers use it effectively for teaching and learning.

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