

Prospects and Challenges of Learners On-line Discussion Forum Interaction in an ODL (Open Distance Learning) Institution

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to monitor the nature of on-line interaction between the learners and educators. Data was collected by qualitatively and descriptively. A non probability purposeful sampling technique was chosen. The required data was extracted from the discussion forum interaction. The sample was second and third year health services management learners of an ODL (Open Distance Learning) University in South Africa. Data was collected weekly during the first semester from March to June 2012. The nature/type and trend of interaction were shown. Out of 1,379 learners only 53 participated in the discussion forum. Themes which emerged were assignments, study material, video conference study groups, registration and examination. Challenges revealed were originally academic, technical and administrative. Challenges of delay in getting study material, delay/no response from the lecturers, assignment answers incorrect and no connection from venues of video conference was noted. Recommendation was awareness of collaborative effort to support learner led by top management of researched ODL institution to address the challenges which learners were facing. Learners to be motivated by the educators are actively participate in the discussion forum. Further research is to be done on educators' prospects and challenges of on-line discussion forum interaction in ODL institutions.

Key words: On-line, interactivity, learners, ODL.

1. Introduction

The 21st century has been faced with rapid developments in information and communication technologies. On-line learners are individuals who can collaborate with their peers through communication technology [1]. As more institutions set up distance education system, the roles of instructors will continue to change. In moving to a distance education system, some instructors will have the job of preparing materials without being involved in interaction with students, or if they do they will have to use the communications technologies and learn to teach differently [2]. Regardless of what form of distance

education is being designed, one element that must be uppermost in the designers' minds is the extent of students' participation that is needed and how to engineer it [2].

The evolution of distance education is generally described as generational, a term that relates to the technologies and pedagogies prevalent at a particular time [3]. There is however a large body of learners that have yet to be reached and providing access to them while ensuring equity poses definite challenges for the ODL system. The ODL system has the capacity to integrate the state-of-the-art technologies with the time tested methodologies. It is therefore imperative to examine threadbare, issues associated with social, economic, political academic and technological aspects of the system in the emerging scenario [4].

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Distance learning as a field of education focuses on the pedagogy, technology and instructional design that aim to deliver education to those students who are not physically "onsite" like in traditional classroom [5]. Thus enrolment in distance education and on-line environments has increased because of advances in information and communication technologies, changing economic times and the desire to improve skills [6].

Fully on-line courses are also becoming progressively more popular because of their "anytime anywhere" learning flexibility. One of the ways students interact with each other and with the instructors within fully on-line learning environments is via asynchronous discussion forums. However, students' engagement in on-line discussion forums does not take place automatically [7]. It is argued that on-line learner participation is a complex process of taking part and maintaining relations with others, is supported by physical and psychological tools, is not synonymous with talking or writing and is supported by all kinds of engaging activities. Participation and learning are argued to be inseparable [8].

Administration of a quality ODL program depends on clear and accurate communication to students. Qualified tutors and support staff must be recruited, they must be provided with development opportunities related to instruction, content knowledge and technical skills, and they must receive feedback on their teaching. There is no use if the resources are available to support ODL program but the tutors does not utilise them. ODL tutors are likely to have the desired attitudes and understanding of the ODL teaching and learning process. For faculty members to succeed in ODL they need to be supported with accurate and complete information and training in order to develop their skills and understanding [9]. The administrators of higher education institutions will face increasing demands for funding, technical support, new curricula and skilled personnel [10].

Health educators have also joined other academic

colleagues in offering on-line learning opportunities at an increasing rate [11]. As most nurses undertake post registration training, learning without disruption to the workplace is increasingly attractive to employers. Learners are no longer leaving their work environment to attend courses offered face-to-face. Through interaction they learn from each other, share and discuss information related to their learning [12]. ODL (Open Distance Learning) allows adult learners who have employment, family, and/or other responsibilities to update knowledge and skills related to their job by saving travel costs and allowing flexible schedule [12].

Different higher education institutions may have their prescribed ways of interacting on-line [13]. The researched university in South Africa is an ODL institution, there is an expectation that the learners' interact mainly through different technological tools for them to succeed in their learning. The learner must actively interact on-line with other learners, tutors, the university, the content and the study material for them to succeed academically by using the discussion forum of myUnisa, being a website developed for on-line interactivity. By posting information on the discussion forum link of the website by the tutors and university administration, learners are encouraged for an examples, to form study groups and reminded to start with their assignments as a way of facilitating learning.

For effective learning to take place there is a need to interact face-to-face or electronically with your peers, educator, the higher education institution and the study material. Although academic institutions have invested substantial resources in on-line interactive technologies to facilitate learning, the benefits of such system will not be realised if learners fail to use the system [14]. Discussion forum's activities help learners to share and gain knowledge from each other. However, setting up discussion forums does not ensure that learners interact with each other actively [15]. Hence this study aims at exploring the learners' on-line interactivity in an ODL institution with other learners, educator, study material and ODL institution and how

on-line interactive tools be used to enhance interaction in teaching and learning.

Irrespective of the opportunity afforded by the researched ODL institution, for the learners to interact on-line through the discussion forum, HSM (Health Services Management) minimal or lack of interactivity is a concern to the researcher. How can they be motivated and supported to interact on-line in an ODL environment?

The researcher strongly supports maximum interactivity of the learners through on-line distance education. On-line interactivity is highly encouraged to enhance the facilitation of learning. HSM learners will not dissociate themselves from utilising the discussion forum in an open distance learning institution.

This study will monitor the nature/type and trend of interaction between the learners and educators and to present the recommendations to the researched ODL University in South Africa.

2. Research and Methods

The purpose of this study is to determine the nature/type and trends of discussion forum interaction in an ODL institution. The objective of this study is to monitor the nature/type and trends of interaction in order to report the findings and make recommendations to the researched ODL University in South Africa. A qualitative, and descriptive research design was chosen. Discussion forum was used to collect data qualitatively. From the data collected, patterns or trends may emerge and possible links between variables can be observed but the emphasis is on the description of phenomena [16]. A non probability purposeful sampling technique was chosen. This was appropriate, as it afforded the researcher's judgment of the research milieu's conformability and the respondents' compatibility with the anticipated outcomes of the investigation. The sample was second and third year health services management learners of the researched ODL University in South Africa. The inclusion criteria consisted of:

- males and females;
- second and third year health services management learners of Unisa;
- employed in any setting;
- all ages;
- all South Africans and non-South Africans.

The existing data was found in the interaction of the learners and educators which is reflected in the discussion forum. The researcher was interested to extract data from the information found in the discussion forum interaction which will address the research purpose. There was no instrument which was used because it was not easy to do that as data was readily available in the discussion forum which covered the interest of the researcher.

This was conducted weekly by opening, viewing and saving discussion forum interaction of the second and third year HSM (Health Services Management) learners. The documents of the weekly interaction were printed. Hard and electronic copies were saved as evidence that data was collected and for data analysis purposes. Adherence to Unisa research policy regarding utilisation of learners' on-line was considered. The policy allows the lecturers to view the discussion forum because it is the lecturers' responsibility to do that without getting the permission from the students for interaction purposes.

They are assignments, study material, social networks being, podcast, video conference and BBM (Black Berry Messenger). study groups, registration, examination, trends, benefits and challenges of on-line interaction. There is an on-line software called student system in the researched university. In the student system, there is indication of the number of learners registered per semester per subject and the year of study. It was found that, 614 second year learners registered for first semester but only 23 learners participated in the discussion forum. Third year learners who have registered for first semester were 765 but only 30 learners participated in the discussion forum.

Thus a total of 53 learners participated to this study. The researcher manually counted the learners who were participating on the discussion forum to come to a total of 53 learners, thus the findings are from those who participated in the interaction of the discussion forum. What emerged from the analysis was academic and administrative type of on-line interaction themes from the learners. These were addressed to the learners themselves, lecturer and the university. They are assignments, study material, social networks being, podcast, video conference and BBM (Black Berry Messenger), study groups, registration, examination, trends, benefits and challenges of on-line interaction. It was also noted that from the emerging themes some challenges and benefits of on-line interaction were revealed. These benefits and challenges were also analysed.

Use of quotations from participants assisted in analysing data. Some of the quotations were modified by the researcher so that the reader would understand the meaning of the information derived from the participants.

The following discussion is based on the emerging themes.

2.1 Assignments

2.1.1 Clarification of assignment questions and length

Student completed an assignment but, because of being unsure of the required length, she asked peers for assistance.

"I've done assignment but would like to know within how many pages the assignment is supposed to be before I submit it?"

"Sanibonani fellow students, I just got stuck a bit with question 23 assignment 3, my best option would be 5 (a, c, d) but I have a problem with d the budget variance report."

"Please guys I need help with assignment 2, I don't understand the formulation of policy statement for each of the categories. Anyone please help."

"Hi fellow students, I'm having problems with

assignment 2. I am unable to get the characteristics of change in the health care institution. I am using two books which states different information."

This means that students have a challenge of answering an assignment question. Other students assisted peers. Clarification is indicated.

"Be careful, it is not about using the big terms but understanding the core context and make a difference in our already limping health services. Happy studies. I am glad to hear that I made a difference in your studies."

"Hi everybody assignment 2 is really not difficult!!. On page 582 in Booyens 1998 the categories are listed under "greater accountability" They are marked with a circle."

"Integrate the information in the prescribed literature. You may however decide to add other information in the prescribed literature."

2.1.2 Delay in submission of assignment

Some students complained about a delay in submission of assignment:

"I'm frustrated my study material has not arrived and my assignment submission will be late."

Thus the students complained about late delivery of study material which can impact negatively on early submission of assignment.

Some students raised about errors picked up in an assignment.

"The unique numbers of assignment in the tutorial letter is not corresponding with the one on myUnisa, are we going to be penalised for submitting our assignment 1 with unique number 729884?"

In this discussion, the lecturer stepped in and apologised thorough the discussion forum.

"The correct unique number for assignment 1 is 729885 as it appears on myUnisa. We apology for the typing error in the tutorial letter. Best wishes with your studies."

2.1.3 Error in marking assignment

Some students raised issues about wrongly marked assignment:

"I don't know if there is someone with the same problem like mine. It seems that the answers that are written as my answers on all those I got wrong are not the same as indicated on my answer sheet. I always double check my answers and I would understand if it was one mistake and not all of them, how can this be rectified? I can scan my assignment to show my answers as indicated on the question because it's all clear without doubt."

"Please note that there seems to be a problem with the marking of assignment 1. Please review and keep us informed."

The findings indicated that this problem was directed to the lecture however it appears that there was no response. Furthermore the students were worried about the feedback and if an assignment has been received, however there was no response from the lecturer.

In addition to assignment marked inaccurately students found that they were asked to submit assignment even after they have submitted.

"I have submitted my HMA 2602 on the 15.03.2012, but today when I was checking my assignments it is written resubmit, I'm so confused whether to submit again or not."

Another learner clarified this.

"Never mind the resubmit word. It offers you an opportunity to resubmit if ever you think you made a mistake till the deadline date. It is just fine like that with the letter resubmit."

This shows that learners' are supporting and reassuring each other as indicated.

"Anyone willing to discuss assignment 2, please contact me. Contact details given."

Comparison of assignment 3 question was requested by a learner.

"I am done with assignment 3 anyone want to compare answers."

The learner could not open the link of multiple choice.

"Hi I can not open the links with multiple choice

questions feedback sent by UNISA. This frustrating!!!"

It appears that this learner is doing follow-up about assignment or the learner wanted to compare answers of the feedback which was received.

Learner indicated that feedback of assignment 3 not yet received, which is a concern to this learner, that examination time is approaching and needs to revise.

"Is there any feedback on assignment 3 and what the correct answers are? Also I still have no marks for assignment 2 and I have not received my assignment back yet. I want to revise these before examinations."

These requests did not receive any responses from anyone.

The discussion of the findings meant that learners are really frustrated by the challenges they have encountered with regard to assignments. As it has been indicated, most of the challenges needed intervention of the lecture, but instead there was minimal intervention. Learners have assisted each other in resolution of the challenges. There was minimal lecturer interaction in the discussion forum. It is of importance that lecture should also actively interact and respond to the learners' queries.

2.2 Study material

The majority of students who participated in the discussion complained about the delay in receiving study material after registration.

"I haven't received my study material as yet ...m : frustrated."

"Dear lecturer, I did not receive study material for the 1st semester."

A colleague advised that the best thing is to register early and download study material from myUnisa.

"I registered in November and received all my materials in December. Go to official study material and download the study guide and tutorial letter instead of waiting and you can start with your assignment."

They also raised concern about ordering books.

"I ordered the books from kalahari.com, it too"

days to be delivered. Can anyone help me concepts of a business plan?"

The response from peer was,

"Try amazon website they are a lot cheaper."

"The book I bought is Jooste 2009. Is it the same as 2003 edition? They didn't have the 2003 edition."

The lectures responded,

"Yes Jooster 2009 is the prescribed book as the second edition. Use it in conjunction with the study guide, other recommended books and journal articles."

One learner showed generosity by indicating that she is selling the prescribed book.

"Prescribed book for HMA 3703 is for sale. Contact details given."

Many of the challenges students encountered had to deal with books and study material.

2.3 Video Conference

Students were reminded of attending the video conference by the lecturer. The learner appreciated the reminder by thanking the lecturer.

"Dear Ms ???? thanks a lot for yesterday's video conference sessions, they were very helpful. I feel confident and ready for the forthcoming exam."

They have confident that they will be ready for examination after video conference.

However, there were learners who could not attend video conference due to time and distance. To address this problem a learner posted to the lecturer.

"Prof ... is there any possibilities that you can attach issues that were discussed on the video conference here on myUnisa because some of us never got the chance to attend as East London center which is 200 km away had a problem and it was even more difficult to get to Port Elizabeth."

The learner asked for the feedback of video conference for sharing purpose with other learners.

2.4 Study Groups

A learner advised colleagues to study in groups.

With response to that a peer asked study groups at Kempton park area and the other one at Pietermaritzburg area.

"Hello fellow students I'm looking for a study partner around Midrand, Kempton Park call or SMS ..."

"Hi fellows if there is anyone staying in Pietermaritzburg and interested to join study group please contact me at ..."

Study partners around Johannesburg, Pietermaritzburg, Kempton Park, Midrand and Harare were needed by respective learners.

Contact details were provided by those learners. This indicated that students need support during studies to bridge the gap of distance.

Colleagues were also invited to join BBM.

However these students did not get responses.

The implications of no response might mean that students are less interested in forming on-line study groups or either they prefer the formation of study groups face-to-face. Learners have different learning styles, some learners are not in favour of studying in groups. However irrespective of the implications it is appropriate that students should respond to their peers.

2.5 Best Wishes

Just before the May-June, examinations lecturer wished learners well. Reassurance was given and basic guidelines in preparation for examination were provided. A learner also wished peers well during the coming examination.

2.6 Examinations

"I am completing my preparation for the examination and would like clarification regarding the reference in Booyens. I have 2008 introduction to health to health care management. What chapter must I concentrate on? Chapter 6 has nothing to do with financial management."

Researcher's interpretation is that, this appeared to be a late advice, or after thought because it is already

exam time, a learner advised peers how to approach an assignment, by understanding the core concepts.

Guidance was still given by the lecturer regarding examination as the examination was still on, however, the findings shows that the lecturer reassured the learners that examination marking is almost complete and feedback was given.

The learner was interested to know more about content which came out during examination with the aim of utilising the information in future. The lecturer did not respond to this concern.

2.7 Trend of on-line discussion

In March, learners' on-line interaction focused on on-line registration on study material, assignments, social networks being video conference and podcast, study groups and best wishes. Learners have registered but did not receive study material. This created a worry to them as the assignment due dates were approaching and they were afraid of late submission. Focus was also on *assignment*, asking for clarification, assignments were not understood. This showed that learners were preparing for writing assignments.

Queries were posed on delay of receiving marks, other learner's queried marks allocated by the lecturer. Learner showed interest of social networks used like podcast and video conferences. Indication was given that video conference discussions should be posted on the discussion forum to accommodate all learners even those who did not manage to attend. However, this was not made available to the learners.

Study groups were created immediately at the beginning of the semester, thus showing that learners were really interested to share during their studies.

In April, trend of the interaction changed. Focus of the interaction was on study groups examination and discussion of previous examination question papers. Learner support, invitation of colleagues for joining BBM was requested by another learner. This indicated that learners were starting to prepare for examination.

In May, the concern was difficulty in opening the

link of multiple choice questions and feedback of the last written assignment. This revealed that learners are seriously preparing for examination and want to see assignment feedback for revision purpose.

In June, there was minimal interaction, because the examinations were on. Only one learner interacted with an interest to know more about the content of the examination, but the required information was for future use. The lecturers reassured learners that marking will be over and gave feedback of the module marked.

2.8 Benefits of discussion forum

By interacting on-line learner clarified issues which are unclear during studies. Other learners asked for volunteers to discuss the assignment and left contact details. Awareness of the formation of study group in the area benefitted the learners. There are contact details of the learners who needed comparison on assignments.

They also assisted each other in terms of referring them to buying of cheaper study material from other learners and from other bookshop. Invitation for joining BBM as another way of social interaction was done for easy interaction. Reminder about the video conference from the lecturer was the benefit.

Discussion forum interaction created a platform for the learners to talk about academic and technical challenges they are encountering like clarification of assignment question, and inability to download MCQ in myUnisa. Information on how to download podcast benefitted the learners by hearing the lecturers' voice and the content which is given. In turn it benefitted the lecturer to communicate with the learners, like reminding learners about video conference, wishing learners well during the coming examination and giving examination guidelines.

2.9 Challenges of discussion forum

The interactions from the discussion forum revealed that challenges were more than the benefits. Some

challenges were academic others were administrative. Lecturers were not responding to some of the learners' queries. Learners had a problem with downloading information from the podcast in April and the lecturer only responded in May. Lecturers had a tendency or responding to students' queries late. For example, an assignment which the correct answer was marked wrongly in April, the lecturer responded in May. Although there was an indication that the query will be attended to, there were delays in response and this affected the learning experience and learners' progress with studies. Even learners themselves are not responding to their peers' concern.

Administrative issues like delay of getting ordered books from the Kalahari website, delay of getting study material from the university like delay in receiving study material. Technical issues like no connection of video conference and difficulty of students to download multiple choice questions from myUnisa were some of the challenges which were raised in the discussion forum.

3. Recommendations

The recommendations derived from this study are related to the practice of learners and educators on-line interaction in ODL institutions.

It was recommended that top management of ODL institutions must lead the process by collaborating with learners, educators, department of education and community members to address the challenges which learners are encountering of on-line interactivity in ODL institution. Educators being guidance of learners must motivate the learners to interact on-line. Orientation and education on the utilisation of on-line interactive tools like discussion forum should be done intensively for all levels of learners. This must be pursued by the university and involvement of information technologist should be considered. It is further recommended that research to be done on educators' prospects and challenges of on-line discussion forum interaction in ODL institutions.

4. Limitations

These research findings were contextualised to health services management learners which are a limitation to this study. If all health studies learners were included more and rich data was going to be obtained.

5. Conclusions

The findings showed that only 53 learners out of 1,379 from both second and third year learners during the first semesters interacted on-line. The interaction was based on academic, technical and administrative issues. Themes which emerged from both levels of learners were, assignments, study material, social networks being myUnisa discussion forum, video conference and BBM, study groups, registration and examination. It was noted that from the emerging themes some challenges and benefits of on-line interaction was revealed. An interpretation by the researcher based on the interaction, showed that learners are facing more challenges than benefits during their studies. This was clearly shown by the way learners were interacting. It was found that educators do not interact with the learners at times they delay in giving the learners response to their queries. Trends of interaction were noted starting from March to June including activities which were done by the learners during those months.

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