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## E-TEACHING AND LEARNING IN AN ENVIRONMENT OF CONTRADICTIONS: EXPERIENCES OF ADULT EDUCATION STUDENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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### ABSTRACT

*Technology has become an indispensable instructional tool in the contemporary world. The circumstances of today's education environment make it crucial for distance education and e-learning institutions to adopt technology for instruction and student support. University of South Africa supports its undergraduate students via e-tutors who are appointed for every 200 students scattered all over the country. E-tutors explain the content and discourse of specific modules and guide students in academic writing. Although all registered students are assigned to e-tutors many of them do not participate in the online learning activities. The paradox of not participating in free available learner support tutorials requested by the students themselves motivated this investigation. The objective of the study was to find out why many students fail to patronise the e-tutorials; the academic support they have requested. Sixty (60) first year undergraduate students in adult education participated in the case study which revealed that most countryside students do not participate in e-tutoring either because of computer illiteracy, lack of access to computer or internet facilities.*

**Keywords:** Concepts; Distance Education E-Learning; E-Tutoring; E-Learning Participation; Student Support.

### INTRODUCTION

Technology has made serious inroads into the education terrain in today's world. In the contemporary world, due to advancement in knowledge and technology new knowledge becomes obsolete within a very short space of time. Gonzalez (2004) points out that one of the most persuasive factors in the shrinking half-life of knowledge is the time span from when knowledge is gained to when it becomes absolute. In fact, half of what is known to people today was not known 10 years ago. To say that the amount of knowledge available to humans in today's world has doubled due to advancement in technology is not an exaggeration. In this digital age teaching and learning usually occur formally, informally, non-formally in different ways and often concurrently. Siemens (2005) sums up that technology is altering our brains as the tools we use define and shape our thinking. Teaching technologies and teaching with technology have now become important parts of contemporary education. The advancement in technology with its concomitant quality communication has provided opportunities for many higher education institutions in Africa to utilise its various aspects for teaching and learning (Quan-Baffour 2013). Lamanuskas, Slekiene and Ragulienė (2010) eloquently assert that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) makes the process of teaching and learning

more effective and beneficial whereas the education system starts functioning faster. It is now obvious that the implementation of new technologies in the educational process can raise new possibilities for both the lecturer and the student. The application of technology to teaching, such as the use of the internet, Skype, MOOCs, e-mail, etcetera, can also enhance the quality of education and make the process of education more versatile. The digitization of education does not only provide accessibility but also makes education quite affordable and reduces the distance between institutions and students. In the contemporary world one can learn and receive instructions from one's home, without physically travelling to attend lectures at a particular venue or classroom as a result of technology. In view of the advantages of technology in teaching and learning, education via technology has become a global practice. However, development of information competence among some distance educators could be a burning issue in some educational contexts where they (some educators) have inadequate knowledge and skills to teach via technology. Butcher (2003) attests that all education and training involve processes of communication between an educational provider and learner; and it is essential to develop an understanding of the modes of communication most appropriate to a particular teaching and learning process. Touching on the modes of communication, Matlali(2017) asserts that we should adopt an educational approach that reaches beyond laptops, tablets and internet access in the 21st century. The educators in distance education therefore have the moral responsibility to provide adequate and appropriate academic support for all their students. This case study focused on how distance adult education students at the University of South Africa experience the academic support provided by the University through technology i.e. e-tutoring and learning.

### **THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

In the contemporary knowledge economy education is an indispensable tool for socio-economic advancement of every individual, community and nation which is why basic education is a right for all citizens of South Africa. During the apartheid era education was segregated, with the much poorer quality given to blacks and the best to whites. Quan-Baffour (2012:1) reports that at the time of political emancipation in 1994 “there were about 15 million adults, mostly black men and women, who could not read or write even in their home languages”. In line with the constitutional provision (that is, education is a right) the new democratic government of 1994 put in place basic education programmes to empower every citizen with basic skills for socio-economic development. Basic education classes were therefore opened in all communities throughout the country to equip all illiterate and unemployed youths and adults with basic knowledge and skills to survive in the new South Africa. Indeed, the destination of education is to liberate oneself from an oppressive and unjust reality. It is the radical transformation of reality to improve it, make it more humane and ensure that humans are recognised citizens of their own country (Quan-Baffour 2012). The University of South Africa offers Adult Education and Training programmes at the Diploma level for educators in Community Education and Training [CET]. Most of the students who register for the programmes live and work in rural or areas without adequate infrastructure such as libraries, and access to constant electricity or communication facilities.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

South Africa is a country of contradictions; within the same province or country one can find first, second and third world communities. The University of South Africa (UNISA) has thousands of students in its adult community education programmes who are scattered all over the unequal communities in the country. While electricity and access to internet may be taken for granted by residents in the towns and cities, the same cannot be said about the deep rural areas where most of the diploma in adult community education and training students [ACET] live and study. As an open distance institution, the University demands that all its students use technology for their studies. i.e. they must type and submit their assignments online, communicate with their lecturers and the University via emails, skype, telephone and participate in e-learning activities offered by e-tutors. The university assumes that all its students are computer literate, have access to internet, can submit all their assignments online and be supported academically via technology. Most of the students, especially those who live at the countryside, complain of lack of academic support and to assist them to succeed in their studies, the University, every year, appoints e-tutors for them. The paradox is that the students who need academic support the most do not patronise the e-tutoring and learning programme. The reasons behind this paradox motivated this exploratory case study.

## **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The objective of this study was to explore the explanation on why most of the students who request the University for academic support do not take part in the e-tutorials which is part of the free academic support provided by the institution to enhance learning.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is underpinned by the theory of Connectivism; a new learning theory that explains how internet technologies have created new opportunities for people to learn and share information across worldwide web and among themselves. The advocates of this digital age theory include Hansen (2003), Siemens (2005)) and Guder (2010). Siemens (2005) describes connectivism as an integration of principles explored by chaos, network and complexity and self-organization. He sees learning as a nebulous environment of shifting core elements not entirely under the control of the individual. The theory posits that learning can reside outside of us as humans and it is focused on connecting specialized information sets and the connections that enable people to learn more important new things than their current state of knowing.

Connectivism is a learning theory that explains how, through internet technologies, humans can connect to each other, regardless of the distance or where they might be located. The starting point of connectivism is therefore the individual who uses personal knowledge to create a network to feed into existing organizations in order to ensure that learning takes place. The connectivists(Hansen 2003; Siemens 2005, Guder 2010 & Remington, 2015) assert that knowledge that resides in a data base needs to be connected to the right people and in the right context in order to be classified as learning. These theorists liken information flow to an oil pipe in an industrial economy. The creation, preservation and utilization of information flow should therefore be a key organizational activity which can enhance learning. They argue that knowledge flow can also be likened to a river that meanders through the

ecology of an organization. In certain areas the river pools and in other areas it ebbs. This means the health of the learning ecology of an organization like a University depends on effective connecting and nurturing of information flow. In this digital age the analysis of social network can lead to understanding of learning (Siemens, 2005).

The central premise of the theory is that connections created with unusual nodes supports and intensifies existing large activities. Thus, computer networks, power grids and social network function on the principle that individuals and groups of people, nodes and entities can be connected to create an integrated whole. Remington (2015) intimates that connectivism is like a spider web, a continuously growing web that creates a strong physical and mental foundation. The more connections in the web, the stronger it becomes. Barabasi (2002) opines that nodes always compete for connections because links represent survival in an interconnected world. In other words, nodes that successfully acquire greater profile will be more successful at acquiring additional connections. Siemens (2005) is of the view that the connections created with unusual nodes support and intensify existing large effort activities. He opines that the theory is based on the following basic principles:

- i. learning is a process of conducting specialized nodes or information sources.
- ii. learning and knowledge rest in diversity of opinions and may reside in non-human appliances such as cell phones, computers and tablets.
- iii. capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known.
- iv. nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning. The knowledge that resides in a data base needs to be connected with the right people in the right context in order to be classified as learning.
- v. Currency (accurate, up to date knowledge) is the intent of all connectivist learning activities.
- vi. Decision-making is itself a learning process. Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality (Siemens, 2005: 10).

### **Implications of the Theory for Distance Teaching and Learning**

Connectivism has serious implications for e-learning and teaching. It can be deduced from the theory that since complete knowledge cannot exist in a single person's mind; different approaches must be explored in transmitting information or knowledge. In this regard, the ability of any organization such as a University to collate, nurture and disseminate information or knowledge is its trump card for survival in this digital age. In other words, an innovation through the utilization of a variety of networks can enhance learning among distance students. The design of formal learning must therefore take into consideration the existing and available nodes and networks that can connect with each other to facilitate learning in the environment; since no single body or gadget is enough for the achievement of leaning goals. As Siemens (2005) intimates, the cycle of knowledge development (personal to network to organization) allows learners to remain current in their field through the connections they have formed. It is implied from the theory that the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) emanates from connectivism as it connects e-tutors and students to share information. Siemens (2005) aptly contends that we derive our competence from forming connections and describes a network as connections between entities. He postulates further that computer networks, power grids and social networks all function on the simple principle that people, groups, systems, nodes, entities can be connected to create an integrated whole.

When the tutor and student are appropriately connected, instruction for meaning making between the two important partners in education can take place. Learning is a social activity which takes place among people. As a social activity based on dialogue, interaction and sharing, e-learning is a learner-centred teaching approach which provides tutor-student interaction, support and discussion of student's own perceptions. Connectivism is student-centred learning and empowers learners to participate in a community of learners, whether that community is the classroom or at the countryside. E-teaching and learning is therefore an opportunity to explore other and new ways of learning via technology. Through technology i.e. e-tutoring, students and tutors can form a community of practice and a learning forum to share ideas and information. Guder (2010) adds that as today's technological innovations change the way we search for information; these changes also affect the way our students and patrons learn. The theory assumes that students should be able to analyse problems and understand how to tackle those problems by navigating their own way through information (Remington 2015).

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

The researcher lectures on a distance education programme that hires e-tutors to provide academic support for new students who are studying at a distance for the first time. The investigation was therefore a case study which utilised qualitative research method of interview to collect data. The experiences of the participants were explored in order to bring out meanings they gave on specific issues (Creswell, 2007) pertaining to e-tutoring and e-learning.

### **The Research Design**

The study sought to explore how first year UNISA diploma in adult community education and training students experience e-tutoring and e-learning as academic support for distance students. The group studied was highly representative or typical of a particular population; in this case University of South Africa students'. As an exploratory investigation the study was aligned to the interpretivist paradigm which is in line with the theoretical framework (i.e. connectivism) adopted for the study. Zikmund, Babin, Carr and Griffin (2013) intimate that qualitative research addresses objectives through techniques that permit the researcher to provide elaborate interpretation of the experiences of the participants without depending on numerical measurement. It attempts to discover the true meaning and insights given by research participants in their natural setting rather than quantifying results. The approach therefore assisted the researcher to do an in-depth investigation into both the description and interpretation of participants' lived experiences to obtain accurate information for this study. In view of the covid-19 crisis, the researcher used one on one telephonic interview to collect data for the study. The approach offered him the opportunity of multiple perspective analysis. That is, he obtained different voices and views of different participants to enrich the data collected for the study.

## **SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION**

The researcher used the random sampling technique to select 60 students registered for the module ABT1511 to participate in the study. The participants were part of six hundred (600) students in rural areas in three of the nine provinces who were assigned to three part-time e-tutors for academic support on account of their poor academic performance. The researcher requested the student numbers of all the 600 students assigned to e-tutors from the academic administrator in the department. He used the lottery method to select sixty (60) of them to participate in the study. After selecting the participants, the



researcher extracted their cell phone numbers from the UNISA student system and contacted them to request for their participation in the study. The eligibility criteria used to select the participants were the following:

**Participants should;**

- i. be enrolled as a first-year diploma in adult education student
- ii. be registered for the module ABT1511
- iii. live in a rural area with inadequate facilities
- iv. be assigned to an e-tutor
- v. have expressed the need for academic support and willingness to participate in e-tutoring and learning.

The 20-30-minute telephone interview focused on: the motivation for studies, experiences of e-tutoring; reasons for non-participation in thee-tutoring programme and how they cope without academic support.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The purpose of the study was to explore why most first year diploma in ACET students express the need for academic support in their studies and yet do not patronise it when the University makes it available to them. In order to obtain the objective views of students on the issue, one on one interviews were conducted on sixty (60) selected information-rich students. To make the analysis manageable the data were pruned, arranged and discussed under the following themes:

### **Theme 1: Biographic Profile of Participants**

When the demographic information was requested from the participants, the study found that their ages ranged between 20- 50 years. Fifty-five (55) %(n=33) were females and 45 % (n=27) males; 40%(n=24) married; 60%(n=36) not married and 65%(n=39) with children. The information above indicates that there are more women registered for the diploma programme than men. It may also mean that since there is paucity of job opportunities in the rural areas, most of the men migrate to the towns and cities to look for work; leaving the women at the countryside to take care of children and homes. As revealed by the interviewees, this accounts for why there are more women enrolled on the diploma in ACET programme to become educators at the local adult learning centres. Women in the rural areas seem to seize the opportunity and the advantage of distance education to study to become adult educators at the local community learning centres. It can also be inferred from the above demographic information that as adults, the participants have lots of socio-economic responsibilities such as being parents, workers, family members and community leaders in addition to their studies. There might therefore be very little time for their studies and this makes academic support crucial for success in their studies.

### **Theme 2: Motivation for Studying**

When asked what motivated them to enrol on the diploma in ACET programme the participants gave various reasons. Eighty per cent(n=48) of the sixty (60) participants corroborated in their responses that they were studying for employment as teachers at local adult learning centres. Twenty per-cent (n=12) of the participants also agreed in their responses that they wanted to improve their knowledge and teaching skills. One participant had this to say, reproduced verbatim;

*unemployment is a major problem in rural South Africa; if you want to teach adults then you should be a qualified educator. You should study both content and methods of teaching adults.*

The responses above indicate that the participants were motivated by socio-economic realities to study at a distance to become well qualified adult educators since they could not go for full- time studies. More so, they need to learn the skills for teaching adults since the methods of teaching adults are not necessarily the same as those for teaching school children. The responses here confirm that the participants take advantage of distance education which enables them to study at their homes to qualify as adult educators. As adults who are home makers with no time and money to attend full- time programmes they see distance education as the most suitable option to achieve their learning goals.

### **Theme 3: Perception and Experiences of E-Tutoring**

The participants were asked about their perception and experiences of the e-tutoring provided by the University as academic support for its students. In responding to this item all the participants (n=60) corroborated in their answers that e-tutoring as academic support is good for students who live in an environment where they have access to computers and internet facilities. Forty-five percent (n=27) of the participants added that apart from lack of access, they are not computer literate. One of them said, verbatim;

*in rural schools I attended computer was not taught; now that I need the skills for my studies there are no training facilities in this community; besides I can't afford a computer because I am unemployed.*

The above response explains why students in the rural areas are assigned to e-tutors for academic support, but they fail to participate in the online programme. Over 90% of the diploma students in the rural areas do not show up when the e-tutors invite them to join the discussion forum. The lack of access to computer and the skills to operate it keep most students out of the e-tutoring as academic support activities; something they desperately need to succeed in their studies. The revelation here is an indication that e-tutoring (and for that matter e-learning) is not suitable for all UNISA students and some other ways must to be found to provide every student with other kinds of academic support that may suit their circumstances. As it is now standing, students who live in towns and cities and are doing the same course might obviously have advantage over their counterparts from the countryside.

### **Theme 4: How Students Cope Without Academic Support**

When asked how they cope without academic support, all the participants conceded that they are not coping well with their studies because of lack of academic support. All the sixty participants corroborated in their responses that they are disadvantaged because their fellow students in the cities and towns have advantage over them. The participants added that study materials reach them late because they cannot access them online; there are no libraries and face-to-face tutoring for them, yet they write the same examinations as their fellow students in urban areas. One of the respondents pointed out (reproduced verbatim);

*UNISA should stop thinking that all its students have access to all learning facilities- libraries, computers, internet etc. The people who did this same course some seven-eight years ago had face to face tutors for them throughout the country. Why not us?'*

It is clear from the above responses that in the environment of socio-economic and geographical contradictions, e-learning, [i.e. teaching and learning] solely via technology is not for every student who enrolls to study at a distance.

## **CONCLUSION**

Quality academic support is a major ingredient for successful studies in any distance education context. It is what really differentiates correspondence studies from a true distance education. Every University that provides distance education has the moral obligation to provide all of its students with academic support to enable them succeed in their studies. In considering the views of the participants, this study concludes that the University of South Africa should not lose sight of the contextual contradictions and realities [unreliable electricity, lack of skills and access to internet] in which it operates and avoids the 'one size fits all' approach to student support.

## **Recommendations**

- i. The University needs to re-strategize its student support practices in order to cater for all the circumstances of its students enrolled on various programmes.
- ii. The institution's students academic support practices must take cognizance of the contextual (i.e. geographical, social and economic) realities of the country and the region if it wants to be a true African university that offers open distance education programmes in an environment of contradictions.

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