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Full Length Article

Use of online interactive tools in an open distance learning context: Health studies students' perspective[☆]

Kefiloe Adolphina Maboe^{*}

Department of Health Studies, University of South Africa, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Background: Open distance learning (ODL) institutions provide educational challenges with specific reference to the training of nurses. They have adopted online technologies to facilitate teaching and learning. However it is observed that most nurses do not use or minimally use tools such as a discussion forum for online interaction to facilitate teaching and learning.

Objective: The purpose of this study was to determine how the discussion forum as an online interactive tool be used in an ODL institution to enhance student-to-student and student-to-lecturer online interactions.

Design: Quantitative and descriptive in nature.

Method: No sampling was done. An online questionnaire was sent to all 410 second and third years Health Services Management students around the world registered with a specific ODL institution during the second semester. Eighty seven students responded to the questionnaire. Data analysis was done quantitatively and descriptively in the form of diagrams.

Results: The findings indicated that 84.9% of students own computers, and 100% own cellular phones, but only 3.8% participated in online discussion forum. Some students indicated that they were technologically challenged. Some lecturers interact minimally online and are not supportive to them. The institution does not give them the support they need to acquire the necessary skills to utilise these technologies.

Conclusion: The article suggests that lecturers, active interaction in an online discussion forum as a way of supporting students, are fundamental to effective teaching and learning. The university should consider providing intensive mentoring to students to enable them to utilise the available technologies optimally.

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^{*} UNISA, PO Box 392, 0003, South Africa

E-mail address: maboeka@unisa.ac.za.

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1. Introduction

Distance education is an important means for nursing knowledge to become widespread (Kantek, 2014). Distance learning, which is a formal or institutional education activity that brings together students, lecturers and education materials in different locations via interactive technologies, is a well-known education method that is used worldwide. In higher education, distance learning practices are based on interactive and information technologies therefore distance education is encountered as an education method that spreads more widely every day than previous traditional modes of teaching (Karaduman & Mencet, 2013).

Although distance learning is seen as a strategy for providing solutions to educational challenges such as insufficient lecturers, an increasing deficit of nurses and the unavailability of continuing education for nurses, the application of technology to facilitate teaching and learning remains a challenge to nurses (Kantek, 2014).

Open distance learning (ODL) institutions provide solutions to educational problems with specific reference to nurses in this article. These institutions have adopted online technologies to facilitate teaching and learning, and to enhance interactivity between students, students and lecturers, students and study material, and students and the ODL institution. Online discussion forums are critical in ODL because they allow students who cannot attend the educational institution to interact with one another. However, nurses do not use or minimally use the discussion forum tool for online communication. This article determines how the discussion forum as an online interactive tool can be used by Health Services Management (HSM) students in an ODL institution to enhance student-to-student, student-to-lecturer, student-to-study material and student-to-ODL institution communications.

2. Background

Technological advances have a huge impact on many aspects of our lives, including education. Over the past 20 years, many universities and educational institutions have been trying to find new ways and methods to use internet-based technologies successfully in teaching and learning through distance learning initiatives. Advances in interactive and educational technologies force us to change the existing teaching and learning paradigm (Altunisik, 2013).

Although distance learning practices are theoretically accepted as a model assisting in formal education, in-depth research must be conducted into the practices of both education systems being ODL and face-to-face, and the effects of these practices on students and lecturers must be measured. In distance learning, knowledge and interactive technologies as well as the ability of faculty members and students to use these interactive technologies are important (Karaduman & Mencet, 2013). The focus on a methodology for distance education usually becomes a focus on technology.

Open distance learning is now largely available in most parts of the world and many working adults choose ODL to obtain qualifications. With the competing priorities of work,

home and school, adults everywhere desire education with a high degree of flexibility and accessibility. The structure of ODL provides students with the greatest flexibility. It gives them control over the time, place and pace of their education. However, learning from a distance is not without challenges (Dzakiria, Kasim, Mohamed, & Christopher, 2013).

The main task of any ODL provider is to design an educational experience that encourages learning. Open distance learning institutions and providers need to consider many factors to overcome different barriers and to implement ODL programmes effectively and efficiently. One factor that affects students' success in ODL is the extent of learning communications and interactivity made available to them (Dzakiria et al., 2013).

As students in an ODL environment begin the work of learning, they need continuous access to lecturers, libraries and other student resources. Students should have adequate access to resources appropriate to support their learning. The education institution should assess the students' ability to succeed in online learning (Tomei, 2008).

The students in this study are encouraged by the university to interact online via the discussion forum and e-mail to facilitate teaching and learning. Balaji (2010) indicated that the use of an online discussion forum has emerged as a common tool and an effective way of engaging students in pedagogical discussion outside the classroom. Although the university gives HSM students the opportunity to interact in these ways, most of them, however, do not interact online or interact minimally online through the discussion forum. Many distance education technologies are employed to overcome the shortcomings of traditional education systems, but this approach has proven to be ineffective due to the paradigm differences between traditional classroom teaching and distance education systems (Altunisik, 2013). Failure might be attributed to lecturers' and students' poor utilisation of online interactive tools to facilitate teaching and learning. It should be borne in mind that as the developments in educational technology continue to advance, the way in which we deliver and receive knowledge in both the traditional and online classroom will further evolve (Kentnor, 2015).

Most ODL institutions expect students to interact mainly by means of their prescribed online technological tools in order to learn successfully and achieve the intended outcome. Students are expected to actively interact online with other students, lecturers, the university, the content and the study material to succeed academically. The ODL institution prescribes the discussion forum as a link for online interactivity among students and between the student and the lecturer. Lecturers and university administration personnel post information on the discussion forum webpage, and students are encouraged to form study groups and are reminded to do their assignments to facilitate learning. Activities in the discussion forums further help students to share their knowledge and learn from one another. However, setting up discussion forums does not ensure that students will actively interact with each other (Nandi, Chang, & Balbo, 2009).

Although academic institutions have invested substantial resources in online interactive learning technologies, the benefits of such a system will not be realised if students fail to use it effectively or if the system is not user-friendly (Lin, 2007).

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