Facilitation in Open and Distance Learning: A Catalyst for Qualitative Learning

By

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Abstract

The primary aim of the Open and Distance learning (ODL) system is to open the world of higher education learning to all, mostly the educationally deprived, either by time, place or poverty. This is to enable every individual that so desire, to realize their academic potential. Most ODL institutions use the print material as their primary delivery tool to reach their students. The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) having adopted ODL mode as practiced successfully in other countries, has established student support centres where learners can meet face – to- face for interaction with their facilitators. This approach to learning, meets the constraints of time and space imposed on the non-traditional students such as workers, the migrant population and people that live in obscure places. It is pertinent for providers of ODL to seek for ways of administering qualitative learning to achieve good learning outcome on their learning. This is in a bid to make them be at per with their counterpart in the conventional system of learning who has the time for face-to-face learning. Out of the population of facilitators in NOUN, a sample of 2280 was randomly selected through stratified random sampling technique. The instrument used for collection of data was a questionnaire. Data obtained were analyzed through the use of percentages and Pearson Moment Correlation. The need for workshop/training and mentoring for facilitators employed on or before employment in view of the fact that most are from the conventional system was part of the recommendations. This arise from the finding that some of the facilitators lacked the skills required for facilitation therefore they have a different notion of what facilitation means.

Keywords: *Open & distance learning; Facilitation; Quality; Mode of delivery.*

1.   Introduction

The concept of ODL in Nigeria has come to stay. It was introduced to Nigeria in 1983 but became functional in year 2002 with the establishment of NOUN. The vision is to provide highly accessible and enhanced quality education anchored by social justice, equity and national cohesion through a comprehensive reach that transcends all barriers. (Alaezi, 2006). As the first and only single mode ODL Institution, delivery is predominantly through Print and multi media and face-to-face tutorials, seminars, workshops and practicum. The print material, often referred to as course material are either developed by in-house by NOUN or adapted from materials obtained from outside sources – other open universities. They are put together in a manner that activates the dormant critical and analytical abilities of the learner, hence the course materials are written in an interactive manner. Ryan (2000), postulates that ODL courses are made up of a number of course components or learning materials (which can include teaching texts, study guides, course guides, reference materials, assignments, television broadcast or video tapes, radio broadcasts, software or online information, CD ROMS text books as well as laboratory materials).

In a bid to take ODL to the doorsteps of every Nigerian, NOUN as a federal established institution has 47 study centres - 36 state study centres, 5 community study centres and 6 Special study centres all over the

federation. Most of this centres are situated in non technology savvy areas, therefore there is heavy dependence on course materials. To facilitate learning and enhance the delivery mode, facilitators are employed at all the centres. This further aids interaction of learners using the course materials. This delivery method in NOUN is asynchronous because instruction is received at a different time than it was delivered- (but the question yet to be answered is by who and how?). Course materials are in module and also that they are for learner's independent study. Face –to – face interaction between facilitators and learners take place within 8 weeks after registration has closed. This should be a time when misconceptions and ambiguities are cleared by facilitators.

However, facilitation seems to be a challenge to many of the tutors because of their 'conventional' background. Some of these facilitators often find it difficult to adjust from being a lecturer with conventional mode or unidirectional teachers to facilitators. ODL is more about process and discovery than memorisation and repetition of contents. This study therefore is concerned with determining the rate at professionalising facilitators with particular reference to the School of Education in NOUN. ODL has been regarded as second class to the conventional mode (Hellman,2003), therefore, a huge burden is placed on NOUN to put in place a qualitative method of facilitation to aid and ensure good learning outcome.

Open & Distance Learning and Mode of Delivery in Noun

In a bid to meet the educational needs and stretch the reach to all particularly the unreached or non-traditional learners around the world, ODL system is delivered on a platform based on Information Communication Technology. Current instructional technology can potentially provide effective learner-centred, personalized education for non-traditional, non-residential students around the globe. Learners and faculties are moving from traditional, on-site learning and teaching because of numerous constraints of space and time, therefore necessary adjustments are needed by both facilitators and learners. However, Africa has a constraint in the name of poor ICT infrastructure. For example, there were about three fixed line telephone subscribers per 100 inhabitants in Africa, compared with over 30 in the developed world in 2006. Also less than five percent of every 100 African countries have access to the internet, compared with an average of one out of every inhabitant in the industrialized countries. The very low internet bandwidth with its very high cost is indeed a headache for Africa. (ITU, 2008)

In view of the fact that learners in NOUN are located across a large geographical space, where technology is sometimes a constraint, Landsberger,(2004, p9), is of the opinion that '*learners increasingly will be from different backgrounds. They will desire and   require flexibility in the ways that they study , the resources they use, the sorts of activities that they do and the ways in which they interact and communicate'*

Courses and programmes are prepared in modules for distribution to all the learners. Face- to face support is therefore provided, through facilitation by perceived expert of such programmes.

Indeed, studies have supported face-to-face interaction in ODL (Wang and Newlin, 2001). Online classes reveal that learners quickly become insecure and tend to drop-out; asynchronous mode of delivery does not allow learners to interact simultaneously with their tutors. These processes sometimes limit the amount of interactions regarding course materials and procedures*.*

In accordance to the above, NOUN has chosen course materials as the delivery mode of learning. As Mehrota, Hollister & McGray, (2001) puts it,' ---- has to choose technologies that are appropriate to the educational, social and economic status of learners'.

Using the constructivist approach, Smith, Reed and Jones (2009), carried out a research on Mode Neutral Pedagogy. The research revealed the synergy of all forms of delivery – face – to – face, online and

blended modes. This could be used at any point through out the learner's course of study based on their preferences, requirements and personal professional commitments. They found out that it truly provides a truly flexible approach. The active and engaging process with other learners and subject materials will encourage debate, critical reflections and problem solving tasks that can link course material to application practice. Smith et al further asserted that processes and activities in a classroom are directly aligned to learning outcomes and assessments.

They proposed three essential components as follows:

- Curriculum Design Method (CD);
- Role of the Facilitator in delivery (RT);
- Communication for Learning i.e. through interaction (CL).

This was expressed by a simple equation**: SE**= **CD**+ **RT** +**CL**. The three components are critical to providing an effective learning experience across mode of delivery. However, at the core is the role of the facilitator as shown in their adapted model (See appendix A)

Smith et al further effectively highlighted the three components, but this study will focus on the role of the facilitator. The role of the facilitator in relation to the nature of delivery is very important; therefore it occupies the centre of the model. The components are interlinked; however, if one is weak the learning outcome will alter and possibly fail. That means any instability on any of the components then it would have consequences on the overall learning experience.

Facilitation in ODL: The Role of A Facilitator
A good facilitator is one who talks little when the work is done, the aim fulfilled, they will say: "we did this ourselves"

LAOTZU500BC.
One of the recent changes in Higher education (HE) is the shift from the teacher-centered approach to a more learner – centered approach. This indeed is not just a semantic shift but involves seeing learners as the centre of learning activities. This is not an easy task for non ODL careerists who are facilitating for the first time. However, making this shift in the approach to facilitating learning rather than delivering teaching will open more opportunities for both the learners and tutors.

Learners may need help in overcoming technical difficulties using the course materials and other tools (being used). They may also require help in overcoming diffidence in the projection of their own views, experiences and beliefs. Facilitators assume a supportive role in ODL they loosely are suppose to guide posing questions and hinting at ways at which debates might be developed. The facilitator's involvement will focus largely on offering a facilitated approach to learning rather than instructive. According to Smith et-al, learner's collaboration, interaction and mutual support will increase throughout the course of study so that by the end learners will be self directive and reliant.There is a shift in role from the 'teacher as expert' role in which didactic teaching methods were used, to 'teacher as facilitator of learning' where the teachers guide learners towards resources and sources of knowledge (just as much as being the sources of knowledge themselves). Adrian (1998) reminds us that the production and use of high quality materials does not of itself guarantee improvement in the educational process. And those resources devoid of such materials can introduce problems for institutions and for the overall quality of students learning experience, if a reduced level of support is available to learners as a consequence. Therefore, the issue of facilitation is rather of importance. Qualitative facilitation demands that strategies be implemented.

Statement of Problem

At the heart of ODL system is learner-centeredness. The performance of learners is closely intertwined with the quality of facilitation received. Studies have shown that irrespective of the technology used, facilitation is a determinant of learning outcome (Fraser, 1994). Learners learn through interaction with their environment (consisting of people, things and ideas) and it is a well known fact that interaction and collaboration are potentially relevant to learning. Walberg, 1970, says that much of a learner's performance can be attributed to the classroom-learning, instructional variables and interactions.

Newton (2003) and Martinez (2003) reported a very high rate of attrition of learners due to feeling of isolation, lack of interaction and motivation to partake in classroom discussion. Smith et al (2009) also discovers that with Online learning, there still remains a high figure of students not completing an online programme due to the absence of facilitation. Studies have also shown that not every facilitator reflect on their practices in the learning task. However despite the arrays of research on teaching and learning in the country, no study has reported the nature of facilitation in ODL. This has led to an incomplete knowledge base about professionalism in ODL. Therefore, we ask if, it is possible for just anybody to facilitate without a prior knowledge of what it entails. Consequently, this study sets out to explore the rate of professionalism of facilitators in ODL using NOUN as the first and only open learning institution in Nigeria.

Research Question
What are the factors that can enhance good facilitation skill for positive learning outcome?

Hypotheses
HO1: There is no significance relationship between the levels of commitment of facilitators on facilitation with regards to having a regular job;

HO2: There is no significance relationship between academic qualification and the subject being facilitated as regards effectiveness of facilitation.;

HO3: There is no significant relationship between style of facilitation and the quality of learning process.

2. Methodology

The survey research design was adopted to elicit information for this study. The sample population, 2450, was randomly selected from the study centres within the 6 geopolitical zones 2011 session. The sample size represents 67% of the population of facilitators in 2 Schools (the School of Education and School of Arts & Social sciences). A total number of 2450 copies questionnaires were administered with 95% rate of return (2280). The Questionnaire was broken into two sections: Section A was on the background data while the section B has two segments which were targeted at items such as Skills required for facilitation; Relevance of qualification. Each of the segments consisted of items constructed to elicit information on the sub-themes. The reliability of the instrument was tested at 0.05 level of significance. The data was analysed with percentage and Pearson product moment correlation.

Data Analysis
The data collected were analysed using t-test statistics. All hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

3. Results

Research Question 1: What are the factors that can enhance good facilitation skill for positive learning outcome?

Table 1: Frequency table showing responses to perceived factors enhancing good facilitation skill.

S/no	Item	Agree	%	Disagree	%
1	Leading in informal manner	1,379	60.5	901	39.5
2	Instructiveness	2,148	94.2	132	5.8
3	Substantive discussion	2,045	89.7	735	10.3
4	Controlling	1,389	60.9	891	39.1
5	Focus on subject matter	2,100	92.1	180	7.9
6	Possession of knowledge	1,954	85.7	326	14.2
7	Recognizing, reflecting and abstracting	1,996	87.5	284	12.5
8	Reading, listening and remembering	2,051	90.0	229	10.0
TOTAL	N=2280/ Total Population				

A consideration of Table 1 above indicates that not all facilitators understand the factors that bring about good facilitation skills. The table also shows that most of the respondents see facilitation as Instructiveness (2,148; 94.2%); Focus on subject matter (2,100; 92.1%) ; reading, listening and remembering (2,051;90.1%). Substantive discussion (2,045; 89.7%) Possession of knowledge (1,954; 85.7%). The concept premised on the belief that facilitation connotes the disposition of the knowledge only available to him/her. While ODL sees facilitation as learner' and learning centered on substantive discussion (2,045; 89.7%), it is structured in a way of leading in an informal manner (1,379; 60.5%), recognising, reflecting and abstracting (1,996; 87.5%); reading, listening and remembering enhanced by instructiveness (2,148; 94.2%). Certainly, facilitation is not just about reading, listening and remembering.

The figures above shows how facilitators perceived what can enhance facilitation. Therefore, facilitation should be learner driven, coordination between learner and the tutor. Facilitation gives room for responsive problem solving and it is also easier to foster interaction as it keeps attention and understanding, (Wilson & Whitlock, 1997).

Hypotheses 1. There is no significance relationship between the level of commitment of facilitators on facilitation with regards to having a regular job.

Table 2: Pearson Product Moment Correlation of Level of Commitment of facilitators and style of facilitation regarding their regular job.

Variable	N	X	Sd	Df	r.cal	r.crit	P
Level of Commitment	**2280**	**8.1035**	**3.72**	**2278**	**.132**	**.1946**	**s.**
Regular job	**2280**	**2.86**	**1.61**				

Significant: r= 0.132,p<0.05

The data from the above table shows that the null hypothesis of no significant relationship is rejected. This indicates that having a regular job will definitely have an impact on the level of commitment of the facilitators**.** This is equally confirmed by the SD=3.72 score being higher than the r.cal of.132 score of regular job. Facilitator that sees the job as an extra-income generating exercise will not be fully committed.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significance relationship between academic qualification and the subject being facilitated as regards effectiveness of facilitation.

Table 3: Pearson Moment Correlation of Academic qualification of facilitators based on the courses facilitated.

Variable	N	X	Sd	Df	r.cal	r.crit	P
Academic Qualification	2280	8.1035	3.72	2278	0.17	.1946	*s
Course facilitated	2280	11.5377	1.86				

Significant: r=0.2;p<0.05 01

Table 3 indicate SD=3.72 score being higher than the r.cal of .017 score of course facilitated. This implies that there is a relationship between the academic qualification of a facilitator and the course he/she is facilitating. Therefore the hypothesis is rejected**.**

Hypotheses 3: There is no significant relationship between style of facilitation and the quality of learning process.

Variable	N	X	Sd	Df	r.cal	r.crit	P
Style of Facilitation	2280	8.1035	3.72	2278	.658	.1946	S*
Quality of learning outcome	2280	9.3570	5.49				

The results from the above table indicate the rejection of the hypothesis. This implies that the style of facilitation has an impact on the quality of learning process. The r.criti of .1946 higher than the r.cal of .658, this shows.

4. Discussion

The purview of this study is to determine the rate of professionalising facilitators of NOUN. NOUN so far has been the only single mode university in Nigeria and has recruited most of its facilitators for the entire 47 study centres in the country. These facilitators have been drawn from individuals with the basic minimum academic qualification and expertise from different spheres of life including the conventional universities. However, results from researches have established that in a non computer savvy geographical entity, facilitation in face-to-face learning still remains the best way of providing learning (Smith, et al, 2003; Walberg, 1970; Newton, 2003; & Martinez, 2003). The findings aroused some curiosity as it would have been expected that NOUN being the only single Mode University, would have fully mentored/ trained the facilitators in the skills required for facilitation. The implication of the finding is that NOUN management needs to go the extra mile to ensure that facilitators are well grounded in the intricacies of ODL and have a good understanding of the role of a facilitator and the qualities as well as skills a good facilitator must possess in order to be able to be effective and efficient.

Furthermore, skills in facilitation are very important in order to encourage full participation of the learner, bearing in mind that ODL is learner centered. The findings on the skills required for good facilitation shows the percentage of facilitators that believes in controlling the learners, possession of knowledge and focus on subject matter as against learners being the focus and facilitator being the purveyor of a good learning outcome. Facilitation starts from the knowledge of the learners and addresses difficulties/ issues - identified by the learners. It is based on participatory methods. Facilitation involves letting go of control over the outcome of the process of learning. A facilitator encourages and sees the learners as an equal, and has relationships based on trust. Above all it is learner centered. It is about setting a balance between being a good listener and a good communicator, between being patient and dynamic.
Academic qualification is a good prerequisite for a facilitation position. There should be proven academic qualification in the course being facilitated. Findings showed that some of the facilitators have qualification 'nearer' the course being facilitated for example – a holder of Masters in Public Administration facilitating entrepreneur course. A facilitator should be selected for their exceptional mix

of academic qualification, practical experience and facilitation skill. Facilitators are critical success factor in ODL therefore; they must align with the level of professionalism expected.

The level of commitment of facilitators was another area of concern in professionalising facilitation. Harvey (2009), opined that low commitment can arise when you are not entirely clear about what you are doing, in this case, facilitation. This fact is observed in that most of the facilitators employed are not ODL-careerist or ODL oriented tutors; hence, lack of passion can arise particularly when they have other commitments, seeing facilitation as a casual, non-serious, mere extra- income generating occupation. Findings show that most facilitators are either lecturers in conventional Universities or in job that takes their entire time away from either reflecting on their classroom activities or failing to show up sometimes for facilitation. Level of commitment will have impact on the quality of learning process. Commitment without the necessary allocation of time will result in half hearted attempts which are not productive. (Sheikh, 2008).

A focus on the style of facilitation as regards the learning process indicated that there was a relationship; this implies that facilitation style will have an adverse effect on the quality of learning process. Curzon, (1994) reviewing the Humanist theory viewed the psychology of learning as concerned with creativity, mental health and fulfillment of potential, furthermore, learning is a function of motivation and this involves choice and responsibilities. Therefore, facilitators can imbibe the styles that put learners as the focus of the tutoring process instead of the other way round. This will have a great impact on the process of learning.

Implication of the Study to ODL Administration
Facilitation is an integral part of ODL system. ODL administrators can only have positive impact on the society and fulfill her mission of providing functional, cost effective, flexible learning that adds long-life value to quality education for the unreached if the core values that include quality, openness and innovativeness can be added to facilitation for effectiveness. The implication of the findings therefore to ODL administrator is that qualitative outcome cannot be realized if the system is bedeviled with facilitators that have little or no training in ODL.
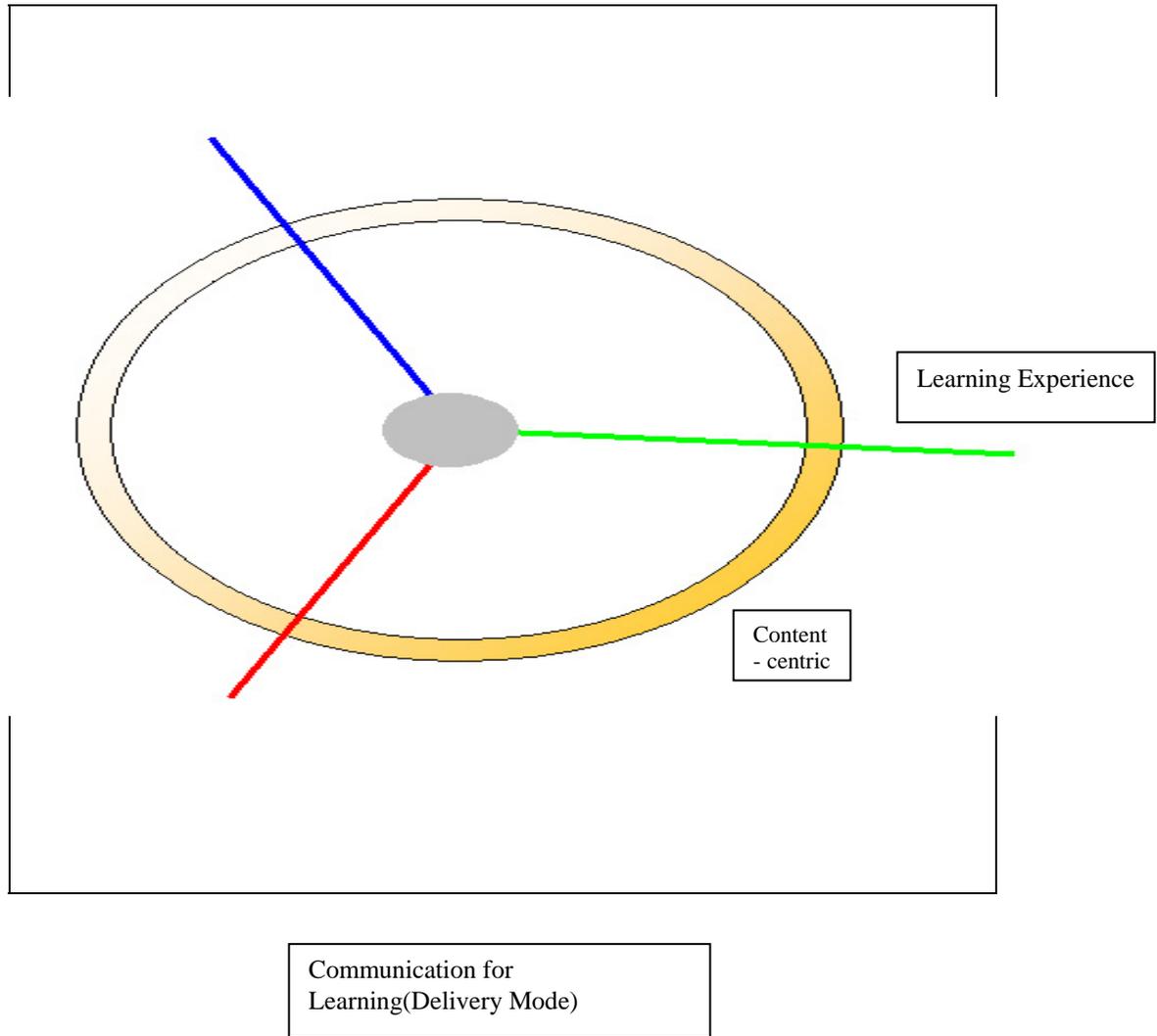
5. Conclusion and Recommendation

In view of the findings of the study, some of the facilitators in ODL are not ODL- careerist, therefore their skills should be developed bearing in mind that ODL is relatively new in Nigeria. therefore it is recommended that a structure should be put in place for newly employed facilitators be made to go through a compulsory training; NOUN should incorporate reflection as a key module for the training roadmap for facilitators; newer facilitators should be mentored in workshops that could develop skills to reflect on their facilitation; though it is challenge to find suitable mentor who are ODL-oriented facilitators, it is pertinent to start a standardised training for mentors to equip them to support new facilitators. This will form part of their yearly work plan. Qualitative facilitation demands that strategies be implemented in facilitation. This will boost the credibility of ODL. In addition, measuring perception of facilitator's knowledge, developing quality criteria and measuring facilitators against a standard which will ensure development and participating in learning will be vital to improvement in ODL.

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Appendix A.

Learning Experience

Content - centric

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Communication for Learning(Delivery Mode)

Adapted from Mode Neutral Pedagogy model by Smith, Reed & Sherratt, (2009)