Issue at-hand

Africa is currently at the confluence of many challenges in education. Its youth bulge, the inadequacy of training facilities for teachers, the conflicts that prevent learners from attending training institutions as well as the relatively new problem of access to and usability of ICTs in Education are all issues that it has to grapple with. In diverse manners, distance education offers many potential solutions to these problems. However to be effective, distance education as a solution provider needs to rely on trained and committed individuals that can truly help the continent to harness the powers of ICTs in education.

The introduction of ICTs in Education and thus the contribution to the advancement of distance education in many countries, has been relatively slow and not without resistance in Africa. Recently in a UNESCO conference on Higher Education, Policies and Research: Quality and Future Challenges for Eastern Africa (May 2017), it became clear that a paradigm shift was required to effectively use ICTs in education. The paradigm shift in ODeLPD involves adopting perspectives, models, and methods that differ from traditional, face to face approaches. In this endeavor, tutors may show little familiarity and technological competencies needed for course implementation. This may introduce vulnerabilities that make traditional teachers uncomfortable. Targeted professional development can help resolve many of these dilemmas.

However, we need to ask one small question: What do we expect our learners (ODeLPD professionals) to accomplish? Those wishing to become distance education practitioners need to embrace two changes: (i) the adoption of distance education (DE) and the realization that it is very different from traditional teaching, as well as (ii) the informed adoption of technologies in
open, distance and electronic learning (ODeL) situations. Both imply a change in attitude and skills that will lead current educational practitioners, especially those not in favor in distance education to relinquish their habits and adopt new teaching practices. This shift cannot happen overnight and requires continuous professional development as well as support to the existing and emerging distance education practitioners. Specific competencies or learning outcomes have to be delineated.

Professional development is the process by which a person maintains the quality and relevance of professional services throughout his/her working life\(^1\). However, what are the learning outcomes that should be in ODeLPD programmes? How are these determined?

**Policy Recommendation**
(i) Articulate country expectations regarding the role of ODeL in National Development
(ii) Articulate institutional objectives with regard to National Development and the role of ODL practitioners
(iii) Define the set of learning outcomes and competencies that practitioners have to demonstrate to fully support the efficient and effective penetration of ICTs in Education at all levels

In determining the type of competencies that should characterize the learning outcomes in ODeLPD, it is necessary to first consider that the ODeL practitioner is an employee working for an educational organization. It must first be assumed that as employees, ODeL practitioners will use any professional development opportunity to take control of their own growth and development and that they will be rewarded with training time and money. *Therefore ODeLPD programs should be linked to institutional and national development goals.* Second, a major change that is required is the recognition by distance education practitioners that their role has changed from the didactic one to the facilitating one. Most of our teachers’ pedagogical apprenticeships involved didactic approaches that were in turn consolidated through their own teaching practices. These need to change. Once the above is understood, to define learning outcomes in any situation involving variations of distance education, a matrix that carries elements from professional development theories and theories of teaching and learning has to be formulated taking into consideration contextual and cultural variables. In this regard, the suggestions of Knowles (1980) and Schön (1983) would be most useful guides.

**Defining learning outcomes in ODeLPD**
Professional development has to be meaningful: professional developers are constantly asked to demonstrate that what they do really matters. The important question that has to be asked in

\(^1\) UK Institute for Continuous Professional Development. [http://www.newlifenetwork.co.uk/the-institute-of-continuing-professional-development-i305.html](http://www.newlifenetwork.co.uk/the-institute-of-continuing-professional-development-i305.html)
professional development situations is: **Where do we want to go?** Answers to this question will also provide guidelines for drawing roadmaps for professional development program, the activities therein as well as a definition of the required competencies. These answers will vary from country to country and context to context.

**Adult learning**

With regard to ODeLPD, it can be assumed that the distance education practitioners are adults with, most probably, years of valuable teaching experience. And they will probably find themselves to be in new situations where they may feel vulnerable. So theories on adult education provide relevant guidelines for practice. Knowles (1980) introduced the concept of andragogy to define how adults learn. He advocated a comforting environment as the most conducive one where adults can let out their fears and anxieties with regard to learning new things. This is why despite its critiques, Knowles’ approach is useful. The May 2017 Djibouti UNESCO conference on higher education has shown how some professors may be reluctant to adopt new technologies as well as the new approaches to teaching and learning that are subsumed in distance education. Knowles’ suggests that the following assumptions should be taken into consideration when defining learning competences. These are easily applicable to an ODeLPD context (Gokool-Ramdo, 2011):

**Assumption 1:** The maturing adult learner, moves from dependency toward increasing self-directedness at varying rates. Adults have an inherent psychological need to be self-directing.

**Assumption 2:** The life experience accumulated by the learner is a resource pool for learning. It is a foundation for learning and extension of new knowledge.

**Assumption 3:** People learn when they need to apply new knowledge in their real-life situations- they are ready to learn.

**Assumption 4:** Education is seen by learners as a process to develop personal competencies to achieve their optimal potential. It is desirable that this potential is applicable in real-life situations.

**Assumption 5:** As a person matures, the motivation to learn is internal (Knowles, 1984, p.12).

These assumptions are taken into consideration while developing the outline of the ODeLPD course. Then theories of professional development are grafted onto that outline and determine the learning outcomes.

**Professional Development**

While talking about professional development, Schön (1983) mentions that to improve their practice, professionals need to constantly reflect on what they do and how they do it. Reflection stems from *reflectere*, which implies bending back and in the context of practice, it means
bending back to learn (Gokool-Ramdoo, 2005). Its inceptor in professional spheres, Schön (1983) argues that professionals coming from all walks of life make constant judgments and decisions about their practice. However more than thinking about the technicalities of their profession, their thinking during their action should reshape what they are doing (Gokool-Ramdoo, 2005). Activities within the ODeLPD have to encourage reflexive praxis.

**What are the learning outcomes?**
The above grid carries the clustered learning outcomes for effective ODeL professional development programmes. They cover the 4 main axes of intervention in a technology-based educational programme that practitioners need to master.

Becoming a learning facilitator requires shifts in both beliefs and methods. Therefore, the essential competencies of ODeL practitioners are as follows: (i) knowledge of learning theories, (ii) instructional design skills, (iii) ability to organize and manage instructional material development, (iv) know-how for program implementation and evaluation; (v) empathy and netiquette to communicate through online learning technologies, as well as (vi) skills to undertake assessment and material evaluation.

Usually learning outcomes are dependent on (i) organizational goals, (ii) the contexts and culture in which the ODL practitioner operates, (iii) the level of previous experience, (iv) the level at which the practitioner is expected to teach as well as (v) the different technologies to which the learners have access.

The best way to see results is to have the practitioners simulate teaching an ODeL program by interacting with peers on a Learning Management System. They will immediately benefit from peer critique and support as they work towards meeting the learning outcomes.

**References**

Collected Conference Papers. The 11th Cambridge International Conference on Open and Distance Learning. Cambridge: The Open University Press


For more information, please visit AVU’s Website: [http://www.avu.org/avuweb/en/](http://www.avu.org/avuweb/en/)

---

African Virtual University | Université Virtuelle Africaine
Cape Office Park, Ring Road, Kilimani
P. O Box 25405 – 00603, Nairobi, Kenya.
Tel: +254 20 2528333; +254 20 3861458/59

*Working Across Africa*
Beyond Technological, Language and Cultural Barriers
[www.avu.org; http://oer.avu.org](http://www.avu.org; http://oer.avu.org)

*Policy Brief Copyright © 2016 by African Virtual University*
Published in the framework of the AVU Multinational Project Part II, funded by the African Development Bank
Kindly refer queries to
Research & Development Unit at submissions@avu.org