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Research & Practice in Open, Distance & eLearning

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Designing for open and collaborative learning

Issue at hand

Learners across the world with access to the internet and a computer can readily access free online courses. Many of these courses are of high quality developed for students at some of the most reputable universities in the world and offered as Massive, Open, Online Courses (MOOCs). To date, MOOCs have been one of the most disruptive of all technologically-based innovations in higher education. Despite the abundant offerings from open education resources (OER) and MOOCs, not many learners in Africa are able to work through these courses even if they are able to access them. Part of the challenge is the fact that not many learners are self-directed. The learning model in most undergraduate programs is predominantly one of knowledge transfer as opposed to one of knowledge creation. A foundation that supports self-directed learning and knowledge creation could potentially help learners successfully navigate available online courses. Open education practices (OEP) propose Camilleri, Ehlers, & Pawlowski (2014) can help transform learning into 21st century learning environments in which universities, adult learners, and citizens are provided with opportunities to shape their lifelong learning pathways in autonomous and self-guided ways.

Conceptualizing openness in pedagogical practice

The constitutive elements of OEP are pedagogical openness and OER usage and creation according to Ehlers (2011). He submits that while there is currently no agreement on classification of “openness” of pedagogical models, research suggests different aspects of openness and freedom in teaching and learning models. He proposes a continuum from low to high degrees to help us find a way to start thinking about pedagogical openness:

- Low degrees of openness exist if objectives and methods of learning and/or teaching are represented by closed, one-way, transmission and reproductive approaches to teaching and learning. The underlying belief is that teachers know what learners have to learn and mainly focus on knowledge transfer.
- Medium degrees of openness represents a stage in which objectives are still pre-determined and given, but methods of teaching and learning that are represented as open pedagogical models that encourage dialogue-oriented forms of learning or problem-based learning (PBL) that focus on developing 'know how.'
- High degrees of freedom and openness in pedagogical models are represented if objectives of learning and methods (e.g., learning pathways) are highly determined and governed by learners (self-regulated learners). Teachers facilitate learning through open and experience-oriented methods which accommodate different learning pathways, either through scaffolding and tutorial interactions or through contingency tutoring (ibid).

Some of the methods that correspond with high degree of openness include active learning and collaborative learning in the context of knowledge creation. The design of the AVU OER modules underscores the importance of collaborative learning and requires that one of the four learning activities must include a collaborative learning component. Guidelines to authors note that students learn best when they are actively involved in the process, and that learning activities developed should focus on active learner involvement. Authors are reminded that, students working collaboratively in small groups tend to be more motivated, satisfied and to learn more than when the same content is presented in other instructional formats.

Policy recommendations (i) Open pedagogy is at the heart of open education practices and together with OER usage and creation, make up the constitutive elements of OEP (ii) Designers and instructors can assess objectives and teaching methods for pedagogical openness and find strategies to incorporate methods such as active and collaborative learning.

Collaborative learning as a teaching method is considered an important method for open pedagogy, and this type of learning has the potential to move instruction from being primarily focused on knowledge transmission to focusing on knowledge creation. In discussing the online collaborative learning (OCL) model, Bates (2015) illustrates the idea of using a teaching approach or strategy as a mere add on, as opposed to the primary approach. For example in the OCL model, discussion forums are not an addition or supplement to core teaching materials, such as textbooks, recorded lectures, or text in an LMS, but are the core component of the teaching. Textbooks, readings and other resources are chosen to support the discussion, not the other way round. This is a key design principle, and explains why often instructors or tutors

complain, in more ‘traditional’ online courses, that students don’t participate in discussions. Often this is because where online discussions are secondary to more didactic teaching, or are not deliberately designed and managed to lead to knowledge construction, students see the discussions as optional or extra work, because they have no direct impact on grades or assessment. It is also a reason why awarding grades for participation in discussion forums misses the point. It is not the extrinsic activity that counts, but the intrinsic value of the discussion, that matters. Thus although instructors using an OCL approach may use learning management systems for convenience, they are used differently from courses where traditional didactic teaching is moved online (Bates p. 120-121).

Conclusion

To prepare learners in Africa to harness the opportunities offered by the current age of knowledge and technological revolution, open pedagogical teaching methods, along with the use of OER can empower learners onto the path to self-directed learning and in becoming knowledge creators as opposed to just consumers of knowledge. Collaborative learning as a teaching method is considered an important method for open pedagogy as this type of learning is seen to have the potential to move instruction from being primarily focused on knowledge transmission to focusing on knowledge creation.

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