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What promise from ODeL? Usability and Support Issues in Adult Lifelong Learning

Issue at-hand

Sub-Saharan Africa's educational needs are immense and complex. Formal schooling in most countries has failed to reach optimal levels in quantity and quality for securing a critical mass of educated Africans with basic, secondary and higher education. After three decades of sustained investment in education by African governments and their technical and funding partners within the framework of the Education for All (EFA) global movement, Africa as a whole failed to reach the six EFA Goals by the 2015 deadline set out by the international community (UNESCO, 2015). To date, Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) accounts for half of the global total of out-of-school children (30 millions) and its secondary and higher education enrollments are among the lowest in the world, on average 23% and 7% respectively. The average adult and youth literacy rate in 2011 was estimated at 59%. These statistics indicate that SSA has a huge stock of children, youth and adults that lack basic competencies and skills usually acquired throughout the education system. In a bid to meet the learning needs of these groups, several alternative forms of education have been designed and implemented such as: non-formal basic education for both out-of-school children and youth; adult education or literacy programs for the illiterate; second-chance basic education programs for school dropouts; continuing education or lifelong learning programs for working youths and adults who stopped their education to enter the labor market; etc.

However, most of these programs are very few and limited in scope to cover the learning needs of the ever-increasing number of learners due to SSA's rapid demographic growth. Indeed, the sub-continent has the world's fastest-growing and most youthful population as over 40% of its population is under the age of 18 (UNFPA, 2014). This situation can be turned into a dividend or

a disaster depending on whether or not appropriate social policies are formulated. Among these policies is the extent to which the advent of the information and communication technologies (ICTs) to deliver open and distance learning (ODL) or open and distance eLearning (ODeL) to all learners is seen as a great opportunity for providing universal access to equitable and quality education for all. Africa could actually leapfrog developmental stages in education as schools and universities without walls are not only within reach but are now a reality in a few countries. Most African governments have seized this opportunity and are increasingly investing substantial amounts of resources to harness ODL/ODeL to deliver more effectively and in real time education programs to all learners.

But this investment should not be a mere leap of faith as it should be guided by a careful assessment of the conditions under which ODL/ODeL can be leveraged to provide quality education capable of making a difference in the lives of the learners. With regard to Adult lifelong learning, a less studied area with regard to eLearning, instructional design and delivery are key determinants of effective learning using ODeL.

Policy Recommendation: (i) Establish Continuing and Distance Education Programs and Schools and (ii) address usability and support Issues to ensure successful use of ODeL for lifelong learning for Working Adults in Africa

In a case study of Ghana contributed to AVU's 2016 International Conference entitled "*Usability Issues and Support Needs: What is important to Ghanaian Learners?*" John Boateng explored the issue of quality and relevance of eLearning through the usability concept of programs carried out by Ghana's School of Continuing and Distance Education (SCDE) at the University of Ghana. The definition of usability used by the study is "*the extent to which an application is learnable and allows users to accomplish specific goals efficiently and effectively while maintaining high satisfaction*".

The Establishment of SCDE stems from a policy formulated by the government of Ghana to adopt distance education as a viable complement to the conventional face-to-face education in order to respond appropriately to the needs of adult learners in the use of technology for developing essential knowledge, skills and attitudes for lifelong learning. SCDE has therefore embarked on providing formal and non-formal education programs to adults across Ghana.

Importance of assessing the needs and perceptions of adult learners regarding their eLearning experiences

The main objective of Boateng's study is to understand the needs of the diverse adult population in the Central Region of Ghana in terms of the factors that would enable them to successfully participate in e-learning for academic qualifications. It specifically focused on the

perception of working adults and other learners who have difficulties accessing conventional education due to lack of flexibility in course timing and location.

The methodological framework used by Boateng consisted of administering questionnaires to a randomly selected sample of one hundred and fifty adults drawn from approximately six hundred adult learners who had previously completed at least one online course. These learners were aged twenty-five and above and have been studying and working in the Central Region. They also came from two districts that were also purposively selected from among 21 Districts in the Central Region.

In terms of findings, he found out the following issues ranked in order of importance: (i) that learnability (*how a new user can begin efficient and error-free interaction with the e-learning system*) was a major usability concern for respondents; (ii) that finding and retrieving content and resources for effective eLearning were important; (iii) that the eLearning interface be usable by variety of people with different access issues; (iv) that visual design for eLearning needs to be appealing; (iv) that assessments should be in formats that enable all learners to demonstrate their level of mastery and (v) that effective mastery and use of the electronic media as well as effective guidance and support provided to the learner for effective online learning are also key.

Recommendations

With regard to the importance of using ODeL to expand learning opportunities to a wide range of learners, African countries should:

- Formulate continuing and distance education policies to respond to Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which calls for *ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all*.
- Set up institutions solely dedicated to providing programs to enhance lifelong learning for working adults as Ghana has done through SCDE at the University of Ghana

This study also clearly indicates that eLearning for working adults and others is no panacea to?. If it is to be effective as a complement to face-to-face instruction or as the only means for delivering courses, it has to be relevant and be carefully designed to meet the learning needs of the adult learners.

More specifically, Boateng recommended that instructional designers and instructors of e-learning courses should:

- be aware of the significance of usability in e-learning and have the mindset to integrate and incorporate usability agenda into the course during the planning phases.

- pay attention to (i) the mastery of the technology by the learners as it is the medium through which the learning takes place, (ii) learnability of applications used to facilitate learning, (iii) accessibility of content and resources and (iv) iterative design to ensure that the double persona of the learner-user is factored in online learning. He also listed seven technical suggestions to design educationally sound and successful eLearning.

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