Effect of Distance Learner-Perception of Course Materials on Access to Learning for Professional Development: A Case Study of Centre for Continuing Education, University of Cape Coast, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, technological changes in learning environments have given way to other available resources to meet the needs of any society. These changes give way to new demands on the provider and the learner. Again, it provides new dimensions in the teaching/learning process. Hence, there is the need for both the providers and the learners to achieve instructional goals. As such, all the instructional materials that the providers deem expedient for the running of all programmes should add up as a vital ingredient for instructional success. To this end, (N=300) questionnaires were administered in an attempt to solicit from learners their own perceptions on learning materials which have been made available by the providers of the programme − Centre for Continuing Education, University of Cape Coast, Ghana; regarding its content, design and usability. It studied the effect of Distance Learner-Perception of course materials on access to learning for professional development. The emergent picture revealed that course materials have been well written and designed and the level of language is within the scope of their understanding. The modules are arranged in units with assessment activities learners need to think through before answering. This paper therefore shares the lessons learnt and recommends the use of alternative study materials and measures to enhance their growth for learning and development.

INTRODUCTION

The quest for knowledge in the twenty-first century is now on the ascendancy. Many individuals currently have realised that education is a crucial tool for development. Their desire for development and the acquisition of new knowledge have necessitated them to seek ways of acquiring it either through the traditional mode or by the Open and Distance Learning. Providers of education have also realised the need and so due to limited classrooms and other facilities, most institutions have opted for Open and Distance Learning to cater for learners who do not gain admission into the regular university system. This is because most institutions of higher learning have realised that distance education could be used as a vehicle to meet the demand for higher education in all aspects of study. It is therefore not surprising that the University of Cape Coast offers some programmes by the distance learning mode. It is the desire of the university to increase equal access to relevant, affordable, cost effective and flexible tertiary education and training by making available a wide variety of graduate and continuing professional education programmes anytime, anywhere through the use of a wide range of technologies. This paper therefore seeks to find out the distance learning learners' own perceptions on the learning materials they use in terms of its contents, design and usability. It shares the lessons learnt and makes useful suggestions and recommendations for the use of other forms of learning materials which could be introduced all in an attempt to enhance their access to learning and development.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Distance learning is not new. This is because it has been in operation for more than sixty years (Owoeye 2004). Formerly, the major medium was the pencil and paper correspondence courses. However, with the current technological changes, other available resources have been put in place to cater for the recent demands on both the provider and the learner. In both the developed and the developing countries, Open and Distance Learning has been redefined to include learners' interaction (Katz 2000). Naturally, in

distance learning, there is a quasi separation of the learner and the teacher in time and space (Keegan 1996). As such, learners' actual contact with the institution is not frequent and regular though they find it to be more flexible and a great sacrifice on their part. This flexibility allows learners to enrol for any kind of programme they prefer whether they are working on part time basis or full time. Peat and Helland (2002), writing on instructional materials emphasized that Open and Distance Learning offers structured learning. In this type of learning, instructional materials such as print materials, audio and video cassettes, compact discs, Television and radio broadcasts and multimedia components are made use of. One should be mindful of the fact that in Open and Distance Learning, the instructor and the instructional strategy/methods are subsumed into the learning material, which has been designed as a self-directed learning guide for the learner.

Learning for development manifests in various ways. For instance, for the past decade, there has been an increase in the use of Information Communication Technology. Experience in developed and developing countries like South Africa, Madagascar, Namibia and Tanzania indicates that Information Communication Technology is used for Open and Distance Learning. In Hong Kong, according to The 1997 Policy Address, it is expected that within a few years, 25% of the content of each subject will be taught with the help of Information Technology Education and Manpower Bureau (1997). Similarly, Togo, Congo and la Côte d'Ivoire have also adopted the distance education initiative by establishing pilot virtual programmes. Likewise in Ghana, current educational policies exist to use Information Communication Technology to enhance access to learning for development at all levels of the educational system. Other learners and people interested have learnt from friends and organisations that have set up computer training centres and are making good use of the knowledge gained. To this end, Rogers (1996) argues, that distance learning can provide instructionally effective, highly interactive learning experiences that are flexible, equitable and responsive to individual needs.

Furthermore, the World Wide Web is an opportunity for learners to be more serious with their studies. This is because it could serve as an effective tool for sourcing information from which learners can find answers to most of the challenges they face in their studies if it is used purposefully. Moore and Tait (2002) asserted that in developing countries, human knowledge resource development through initial and continuing education is necessary for growth and development and also has far reaching social impact. As such, for the society to have the actual impact, the materials used must be really user-friendly in such a way that learners would read and understand and be able to apply the knowledge gained for future task accomplishment. Hence, Coleman and Anderson (2002) support this by commenting, that the type of information given to learners in any form must be fit for the purpose, relevant to the moment, adequate and accessible for the development of the individual.

It is interesting to note that in most of the developed countries, many institutions offer Open and Distance Learning programmes. In all this, course materials are designed to have interactive sessions whether they are given in the print, compact disc or virtual classroom format. This again assists learners to work on their own. The universities concerned thus supply the learners with course materials through the print-based media and by post. In some cases, there is a form of teleconferencing and or electronic networking. Nonetheless, Cummings and Sayers (1996) and Spiron (1995), writing on Open and Distance Learning materials commented that any design of a distance learning curriculum needs to be sensitive to cross-national cultural experiences. They stressed that if any research conducted does not focus on making the content and design local, the material will not be suitable and will therefore pose a problem. For effective process of Open and Distance Learning, it is very crucial that teachers are assisted during the design and writing of the instructional material. This is because helping them to design the material structure, organisation and layout helps to consider the pedagogical aspects that assist learners' desire for acquisition of knowledge for development. Similarly, where the material is made easy to be read and understood, and learners see it as user-friendly, in a way, lecturers/facilitators are making the learners work easier. This will definitely increase the usability of the material. If learners are therefore able to have a positive perception of the material used for the continuing education programme regarding its content, design and usability, then, they will be able to access the materials with ease and interest; thus enabling them to perform well in quizzes, assignments and examinations. This certainly will lead to progressive and sustainable access of learning the material for development.

METHODOLOGY

The questionnaire was found to be the most appropriate and suitable to solicit answers to the research questions posed. As such, the data for the study was collected with a twenty-question survey developed by the authors. The original questionnaire was tested in a pilot study using fifteen respondents. After this, the questionnaire was revised to enable respondents provide the appropriate answers to each question. The target population in this study was all teachers who are being offered Open and Distance Learning by tertiary institutions in Ghana. As it is unusual to deal with the whole population in a survey Robson (2002), the researchers selected a sample of 300 teachers in the basic schools being offered higher education through the Open and Distance Learning mode run by the University of Cape Coast Centre for Distance and Continuing Education. These teachers were the learners in this study. The sampling strategy adopted was the simple random sampling. This is because the researchers realised that it would be more convenient and similar results could be achieved if the same research is conducted with different learners in other regional centres.

The instrument was administered face-to-face to the learners during one of their face-to-face sessions. The researchers sought the informed consent of the participants and participants were not coerced into taking part. Their confidentiality was assured before the instrument was distributed to them. The instrument was designed to elicit from participants their own perceptions of the current course materials in terms of their content, design and suitability.

The first five questions were personal and demographic. The rest of the questions, which sought to find out their personal opinions about the materials they use for the programme in terms of its contents, design and suitability, were arranged and a Likert type of scale was used so that learners could tick only one of the answers provided on the scale. The Statistical Package for the Social Scientist (SPSS) was then used to process the data because the researchers realised it was quick and reliable.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS OF FINDINGS

Research ethics were considered. This paved way for the researchers to seek the informed consent of the participants before the questionnaires were administered. The participants were each given a questionnaire to respond to. The data were later analysed. It came up that all the participants are teachers in Ghanaian basic schools who do not want to abandon the classroom even as they seek to enhance their development by the distance learning mode. It was also revealed that they have the desire to further their education even when they finish reading the diploma programme. Learners' main reason for choosing to read the programme by the open and distance mode are: flexibility, convenience and the fact that it will assist them to maintain their jobs as they study.

Table 1: Results of the Survey

SN	ISSUE	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED
1.	The contents of the course books help me acquire the relevant knowledge	246 (82%)	18 (6 %)	36 (12%)
2.	Examples cited in the course books are familiar	249 (83%)	39 (13 %)	12 (4%)
3.	The different course books give me new knowledge	273 (91%)	6 (2%)	21 (7%)
4.	The assessment activities are easy to understand	183 (61%)	54 (18%)	63 (21%)
5.	The assessment activities help me to learn	234 (78%)	18 (6%)	48 (16%)
6.	The assessment activities increase my confidence	240 (80%)	15 (5%)	45 (15%)
7.	The way the programme material has been designed is clear and helpful	165 (55%)	96 (32%)	39 (13%)
8.	There is some space in each course book for brief notes and comments	189 (63%)	75 (25%)	36 (12%)
9.	Activities in the course books are well structured	177 (59%)	93 (31%)	30 (10%)
10.	I enjoy reading the materials	168 (56%)	66 (22%)	66 (22%)
11.	The appearance and layout is attractive and gives comfortable reading	111 (37%)	147 (49%)	42 (14%)
12.	The course books make provision for insertion of other materials	54 (18%)	207 (69%)	39 (13%)
13.	Language used in the writing the course books is clear and appropriate	192 (64%)	84 (28%)	24 (8%)
14.	The course books are arranged in manageable units	186 (62%)	84 (28%)	30 (10%)
15.	I apply my learning to my experience	276 (92%)	0 (0%)	24 (8%)

It is worth noting that responses to Items 1-6 designed in table 1 which were designed to find out learners view concerning the content of their course materials indicate that generally, it helps them acquire new

knowledge, given examples are familiar and assessment activities are easy to understand and this helps increase their self confidence. This finding suggests that learners could easily achieve learning outcomes similar to those offered by conventional methods.

Findings from Items 7-11 centred on learners perceptions of the design of their learning materials. Learners commented that the way the programme material has been designed is clear and helpful. They like the appearance and the way it is structured and they enjoy reading the materials. This gives the impression that the course writers have the necessary expertise and are well versed in their area of speciality. Additionally learners would endeavour to read through the material before they come for each face-to-face session and this will assist them to excel in their quizzes, assignments and examinations.

Other statements designed to measure learners' perceptions on the usability of their course materials were Items 12, 13, 14 and 15 which indicated that learners held positive perceptions about the usability of the course materials for their programme. This finding suggests that the language level is within their capability and the course materials are manageable.

Discussion of Findings

It is important to note that some interesting facts were revealed from the study. These issues make it vital for the providers to continue to seek further knowledge on how to make learning accessible to as many teachers as possible. These are:

- Distance learning is more of learner-centred learning. Learners who choose to enhance their development by the Open and Distance Learning mode mostly do so for the sake of convenience, flexibility and the fact that they will be able to maintain their job as they study.
- Course materials really have been well written and designed. This creates in the learners the desire to read and understand either for later discussions with their course mates or later retrieval for their quizzes, assignments and examinations.
- Learners currently hold a favourable notion and perception of their course materials regarding their usability. Learners are able to comprehend what they read from their course materials. Examples given are familiar and this enables learners to cite similar examples when the need arises during the period of quizzes, assignments or examinations. This presupposes that Open and Distance Learning could enrich learners learning environment Hackman and Oldham (1976). Additionally, the research revealed that the learners are of the view that the design and content of the course materials are attractive and user-friendly. The effect is that more teachers are opting for the programme and the intake continues to grow year after year.

From the foregoing, it could be argued that new ideas implemented by the providers would really provide more access to learning for the development of the distant learner.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Currently, there is no way that textbooks and other printed materials could be done away with completely when it comes to Open and Distance Learning issues in Ghana. Now that information communication technology is catching up with both the developed and developing countries, learners would definitely need access to more computers that can send and receive messages using web browsers. They can also make good use of computers to assist them look for information to complete their assignments. This is because its been argued that when using multimedia approaches, the learner studies the subject matter as well as learns how to deal with the environment (Passig and Levin 2000). It is worth noting that online support could be offered through real time chat, advice and email discussion groups with staff and other learners to help foster interaction between learners (Ray and Day, 1998). Most of the courses offered are currently through the print media.

Plans are underway to enable the Centre use a variety of multi-media technology. This is because networked media would facilitate greater knowledge and learners would be able to handle information better. The centres would also be well equipped so that learners, researchers and facilitators can eventually access e-libraries, e-learning and virtual classrooms. Tutorials could be organized at the various centres. Learners would continue to use their mobile phones as a means of receiving information

from their colleagues and facilitators when the need arises. This would in effect enable learners to discuss any of their concerns with course coordinators, facilitators or centre coordinators.

CONCLUSION
This paper has looked at the views that the learners in this study have regarding the course materials they use. It has also looked at the learners' own opinion about the content, design and usability of the materials provided them and its effect on their continued access to learning for development.

The findings from the study provide meaningful insights of learners' personal views of the course materials given to them by the providers. They gave a positive perception of the course materials in terms of its content, design and usability. It could be noted that additionally, a learner support system could be put in place to assist learners who may be confronted with the challenges of Open and Distance Learning. Pedagogical effectiveness and the cost of each delivery platform could be examined from time to time to make sure that the learners' needs are addressed.

In fact, the Centre for Continuing Education in Cape Coast, Ghana are in a position to take the lead in providing Open and Distance Learning to Ghanaian basic school teachers and probably expand to serve sub-Saharan Africa in general. Open and Distance Learning has a great future.

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