

Using Social Networks to Assist Learners in Open Schooling in Trinidad and Tobago

Social Justice: Assistive and Affordable Technologies

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INTRODUCTION

At present the National Open School of Trinidad and Tobago (NOSTT) operates many centres in several parts of Trinidad and Tobago. From its inception in 2007, the author has been a part of NOSTT in two different areas – first as a Mentor/tutor of Mathematics and more recently as a Learner Support Officer for central schools in Trinidad. Every August NOSTT begins a new cycle of registration for new learners in all its centres. The classes which follow are well populated and then as the weeks and months progress and the lives of learner's change, the class sizes begin to decrease. The reasons for this are based on several factors, such as work related activities and responsibilities, domestic and social challenges and environmental situatedness. It is because of this reason that using a social network, like Facebook, was conceptualized to harness instruction, whereby all who wanted to continue can be catered for. The two major subjects of Mathematics and English Language were chosen as these groups were the hardest hit by the dropout ratio, they are also the largest classes. NOSTT has been struggling with its mandate to have a blended learning approach and create an Open and Distance Learning environment (ODL), but to date has only managed face-to-face classes. It is hoped that this paper will begin that transformation and showcase the need and importance of ODL as a necessary facet of Open Schools to its clientele in Trinidad and Tobago.

NOSTT at Present

According to the Ministry of Education's (MOE) website of Trinidad and Tobago, NOSTT represents an educational system which uses a blend of conventional and distance education methods and allows learners to choose how to learn, when to learn, where to learn and what to learn using a wide range of educational media. It continues to say that it is complementary to the formal education system and play a vital role in providing people of all ages with learning opportunities that are diverse, flexible, accessible, inclusive, learner-focused and responsive. It facilitates those who may have missed out at an earlier stage or those who may simply wish to further their career goals or personal development by offering more diversified curricula.

In March 2008, at a Regional Meeting of Focal Point in Jamaica, the Director of NOSTT outlined accomplishments and plans of NOSTT till 2012. Once again grandiose plans were made to add on to those of the past with little movement towards the implementation of ODL to any small or large extent. For example, the following were included as new perspectives: to pursue collaborative activities that can build on synergies between the Preuniversity Programme (PUP) of the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT) and NOSTT; continue capacity building activities in the following areas: Course Writing; Computer Literacy Training; Continue the writing of self-study modules in 8 academic and 3 technical vocational areas (print format).

It must be noted that the above are merely all goals, objectives and futuristic thinking of NOSTT which may become real sometime in the future. For the most parts NOSTT delivers a traditional teaching and learning methodology and has plans of revolutionizing this system from September 2010. Thus, what is done in a long-established and traditional normal classroom continues and face-to-face teaching and learning is the only method used. This is the main reason why a great number of learners cannot continue if they cannot attend classes as there are no provisions to remedy or assist these enthusiastic learners.

What is Needed?

Over the past two decades there has been a revolution taking place in how students learn and how educational institutions and departments have been adopting and grappling with complex forms of interactive electronic communication networks to support online learning. The knowledge explosion, as purported on the internet supported by educational on-line software databases and the socio economic trends of knowledge based global and service economy has created a crisis and demand for more effective, flexible, interactive, customized and just-in-time instructional systems. Beyond a doubt this has transformed the area of teaching on the internet. Whatever its form, synchronous or asynchronous, one-to-one or many-to-many, teachers/facilitators must be trained to deliver to 21st century learners not just content but crucial skills. These skills include personal and social responsibility, planning, critical thinking, reasoning, creativity, strong communication skills, cross-cultural understanding, visualizing and decision-making and knowing how and when to use technology.

In 1995, the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment, in the United States of America, produced a landmark report - "Teachers and Technology: Making the Connection" - which revealed that most teachers did not feel prepared to use technology effectively (Poplin, 2003). A noteworthy finding of the report discovered that 30% of the technology budget should be used for teacher training. The focal point up to that time had been mostly on purchasing hardware and software. This report truly brought to the attention of educational administrators everywhere the importance of effective professional development for administrators and teachers.

In 1998 a two year project with 160 K-12 teachers was embarked upon under the banner: "Applying Technology to Restructuring and Learning" with the aim of helping teachers create learner-centered learning environments buttressed by technology (Doering, Hughes & Huffman, 2003). The task was discouraging for this cluster of six schools as they were poor; defined as "at risk" or "low performing" based on attendance rates, student demographics, and standardized test scores; the computer/student ratios were 1:25 and sometimes 1:35; and the teaching force consisted of many teachers who had taught for over 20 years and those who had just started (p. 342-345). This presented a very difficult professional development assignment. To add to this, instruction was primarily done using the traditional and teacher-centered approach. This is indeed an ideal scenario for many schools in developing countries. NOSTT and Trinidad and Tobago will fall into this category most certainly. A number of factors were important for success to be achieved including administrative support, a genuine desire or at least a willingness to change practice and the opportunity between the professional development sessions to apply what was learnt.

Lesson & Sorensen (2006) postulated that in order for school administrators to make integrating technology in schools become a reality then four key points must be considered. They were making the use of technology a priority – the importance of leadership; establishing a technology framework – the importance of the environment; focusing on development – the importance of building a resource bank; and creating training opportunities and support for students, faculty and staff – the importance of supporting people. Current research denotes that effective technology curricula have strong administrative leadership supporting and sustaining technology programs for both teacher and students (Richie, 1996 and Richie & Rodriguez, 1996).

The Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) has discovered that well-informed administrators who are comfortable and competent using technology have been key players in leading and supporting technology in schools (OTA, 1985, 1989, 1995). A surmountable amount of evidence exists suggesting that technology programs in schools operate at a minimal level (Lemke, 1988). Studies also show that school administrators training and knowledge base have not kept pace with the rapid revolutionary changes in both education and technology (Creighton, 2002), causing a lack of enthusiastic support for the integration and implementation of technology beyond the essential level.

In a recent study, technology coordinators from more than 800 school districts across the United States of America told interviewers that many teachers are still unprepared on how to integrate technology into

classroom instruction (McCaffrey, 2002). The study, entitled "Are We There Yet? Research and Guidelines on Schools' Use of the Internet," claims that while many school districts have made great strides in joining the digital age by installing computers and wiring classrooms, schools need to bridge great barriers before realizing a return on their investments in technology. The biggest barrier is the task of training teachers to use computers and the internet in their daily work with students. The survey found that schools need to work on expanding the use of the internet for both teaching and learning. The Internet is still viewed primarily as a research tool. "Conversely, 63 percent of those surveyed said they are offering Internet-- based staff development" (p. 5). Thus there is a need for professional development.

It is therefore appropriate to conclude from the above that monies and time spent on staff development in the use of technology, for the purpose of integrating technology into their teaching and learning, is monies and time well-spent, and must be seen as an integral facet in technology education, in terms of training. The current emphasis on technology is to ensure that it is used effectively to create new opportunities for learning and to promote student achievement. Educational technology requires the help of all educational personnel who integrate technology into the curriculum, align it with student learning goals, and use it for engaged learning projects. The quality of teaching is the factor that matters most and thus professional development for teachers become the key issue in using technology to improve the quality of learning in the classroom.

NOSTT, as part of MOE, has its part to play in firstly getting its mentor/tutors/facilitators and learners ready to deal with these changes. The same teachers who teach in secondary schools are also transformed to mentor/tutors after school with little or no training. The curriculum and the summative assessment are the same and instruction likewise. The problems with NOSTT learners must also be factored in because the age limit is very wide – those who are no longer eligible to be in secondary school. Some learners have been in their fifties. Surely this presents another type of learner. The need for continuous professional development is therefore critical.

The Intervention

One of the books that NOSTT provided to its mentor/tutors in 2007 was *Tutoring in Open and Distance Learning: A Handbook for Tutors* (O'Rourke, 2003). It describes the benefits of ODL as allowing learners to study when and where suits them best while continuing to fulfil commitments to work, family or community. ODL also caters for those learners who reside in remote areas or limited and dangerous travelling ventures to attend classes. The handbook also see ODL as providing a variety of study opportunities (academic, technical/vocational, personal and professional development, basic education) to a wide range of learners (young adults, adults returning to learning, people preparing to enter trades and persons acquiring new work-related skills). In other words, NOSTT has mandated itself to provide an educational service which caters for learners who may not be able to attend classes regularly or consistently. From the author's understanding and being part of NOSTT this has not been realized to date. There is however plans to move toward this in the latter part of 2010 or sometime in 2011 - thus the reason for the following intervention.

The use of Facebook as an instructional platform was chosen because of its simplicity and popularity to all learners. Due to its attractiveness and familiarity and its use as just a social network by most, it is conceptualized that showing that it can be used as a learning aid was indeed practical and possible, especially in a country like Trinidad and Tobago, where it is looked at by decision makers as non-academic. The setting is ideal for NOSTT learners who after having grand ideas of improving their grades at the Caribbean Examination Secondary Certification are faced with multiple challenges to continue with face-to-face classes. The time of most classes on evenings is not very practical for working individuals. For example, at the Waterloo Secondary School Centre the classes begin as early as 3:30 pm and the duration is two hours. For subjects like Mathematics and English Language, the face-to-face classes meet twice per week and on one day it begins early (3:30 pm) and then 5:30 pm on the other day. Normally it first becomes difficult to attend the early class and since there is nothing put in place for reporting what was done something is needed to fill this gap. The author had many instances where learners discontinued because of lack of this feature in NOSTT.

Facebook Group

In Trinidad and Tobago the availability of internet access throughout the twin-island state is within reach. The learners only need an email address and to be a member of Facebook or in the case of Facebook Groups just internet access. A Group account will be created for the various Mathematics and English Language classes where discussions, in the form of post, or Wall notifications, are possible. Care must be taken when creating the Facebook Group in the settings page to ensure that some aspects are turned off to minimize learners from added videos, personal pictures and links. This will be in the domain of the Mentor/creator of the Facebook Group. Also, the Mentor/creator should make it "closed" in order that the general public cannot have access to the contents of the website. Once the Group Account has been created and all the learners of that particular class are on, then the advantages of using primarily the internet and secondarily Facebook, can be achieved.

If any learner misses any classes then the synopsis of what was done for that session will be uploaded. Any and all post will be answered timely for the benefit of the entire group. Some learners who may be afraid to ask questions in class may find it easier to do so in the discussion posts. Links to other sites on the internet will be made accessible to learners. When these learners become more familiar with surfing on the internet, a class Wiki can be created to complement Facebook. It is also envisioned that some filming can be done of the Mentor/tutor and made obtainable to the missing members on YouTube. The possibilities become endless but a starting point is crucial and using Facebook is seen as this option.

The main purpose of using Facebook Groups is to ensure that contact is maintained and that learners interest, eagerness and passion which first bought them to register with NOSTT to improve their grades at CSEC and other qualifications offered, are not lost or compromised to the point of discontinuing altogether. So if someone misses a class the Mentor/tutor can drop them a note/message which can say "hello, I missed you today/yesterday". This will make them know that NOSTT cares and will continuously keep in touch with them. This message is private and many times people are anxious to learn who have written on their Wall. Home lesson can be uploaded and corrected as well as timely assistance given when learners are completing assignments.

It is a truism that Open school refers to situations where learners are responsible for their own learning and where the guidance of a tutor may not be present. However, there will always be situations where organizations like NOSTT have their part to play. Facebook is one of many platforms which can be used as a foundation to oversee ODL using the Group Account facility.

Conclusion

NOSTT has been mandated with assistance from the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) to cater for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago who have not completed their CSEC qualifications and other necessary skills. There has been sporadic workshops and theorizing of the benefits of ODL and its corollaries. In the meantime many learners have left because of them not being able to have the option of ODL privileges. There have been many success stories to be derived from the operations of NOSTT and of young (18 and 35 years) and old (35 years and over) learners. The number who have discontinued and who will continue to do so if the principles of ODL are not harnessed will be left to be seen in the future. Facebook as an instructional platform can begin the process of keeping a great amount of learners in NOSTT and ensure that the mandate of Open schooling is a resounding success. The fact that citizens can register means that they have taken the first step of improving themselves. It is now the responsibility of the institution of NOSTT to assist them in remaining focused by simply doing its part.

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