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Open Learning: The Nigerian Context

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Abstract:
While the role of the formal school system remains relevant, the current population, increased demand for education, Open Learning, which is the main thrust of Distance Learning, becomes a ready alternative. It is morelearner-centred, promotes life-long education, it is flexible enough to accommodate learners' conditions. This helps the removal of possible barriers to access education. Open learning is also viewed in the Nigerian context. In specific term, this work takes a close look at Open Learning, paying attention to its definition, modes of operation, its unique complementary role and capacity to serve several people in spite of their academic and environmental variations. Nigeria is blessed with a wide range of human and natural resources but limited in the right kind of education that will liberate the nation for proper tapping and utilisations of these resources. This work thereby amplifies the possible roles that Distance Education through Opening Learning could play.

Keywords: Open learning, distance education, open distance

1. Introduction

Education is increasingly recognised as very important to national development and one of the best investments one can make for purposes of self actualisation and meaningful participation in one's community. In a fast developing nation as Nigeria, it is recognised as an important medium for imparting knowledge, skills and techniques for preparing citizens for change and transition, and for instructing members of any society in the accepted norms, values and practices (Omolewa, 1981). It contains two domains: regular (conventional) education also referred to as formal education; and non-formal education which is often referred to as adult education. The concepts of non-formal education have been used to generally denote educational activities that take place outside the formal or conventional schools and universities, especially for persons not engaged in full –time education and training. Non-formal education is often associated with adults particularly those, who for various reasons, were unable to attend school in the formal setting. Now they are advanced in age, have other activities clamouring for their attention and so, need another alternative to go back to school in order to satisfy their educational yearnings. According to Omolewa (1981) and Aderinoye (1997) adult education is primarily concerned with organised and sequent learning experience, designed to meet the felt needs of adults. Over-lapping terms such as lifelong education, continuing education, open distance education, to mention but a few, have since emerged. As a result of its popularity, currency and acceptability, this work looks at the concept of open learning. It is particularly linked with the Nigeria situation where the formal school has not been able to meet up with the demands of all those who desire education.

2. What is Open Learning?

Open Learning means different things to different people. This seems normal as a result of individual differences and perceptions. Even differences also exist in the academic world where there is always effort to reach certain consensus that would be central to the definition or concept been given to a word, phrase or certain phenomenon. Conscious efforts are always made to avoid ambiguity and obnoxious deviation from what could be traced to what is being defined or conceptually propounded. Scholars and Organisations have attempted to proffer what might be generally accepted as constituting'Open Learning'. Since this work is not for a review of definitions it picks the one considered relevant enough for this work as reflected in the next paragraph.

The South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) gave a very comprehensive and detailed description as well as definition of open learning which seems sufficiently encompassing; it embraces all the features and characteristics of open learning. This definition is what this work adopts. To this effect open learning is seen as:

an approach which combines the principles of learner centeredness, lifelong learning, flexibility of learning provision, the removal of barriers to access learning, the recognition for credit of prior learning experience, the provision of learner support, the construction of learning programmes in the expectation that learners can succeed, and the maintenance of rigours of quality assurance over the design of learning materials and support systems (SAIDE).

From this foregoing definition, Open Learning, like the name implies, seeks to remove barriers that conventionally have hindered free flow and access to education for all. It 'opens' up learning opportunities to as many as desire to do so in an informal way. This concept, in away, brings education to the door step of learners.

This does not mean that it necessarily makes learning easier in term of learning what ought to be learnt, but it opens up the restrictions of learning posed by the conventional systems of education which often bars adult learners from active participation particularly the less privileged who always constitute the larger percentage of the society. But, it provides learners with a reasonable chance of success in an education and training which deliberately targets and addresses the specific learning needs of learners. Open learning often operates in a distances learning mode. As a result, it is also called open distance education. Meanwhile, Moore, (1977) defines distance education as the instructional methods in which the teaching behaviours are executed in physical separation from the learning behaviours. With this definition, it implies that those in a contiguous situation would be performed in the learner's presence so that communication between the learner and the teacher (called the facilitator) need be facilitated by print, electronic or other devices. Moore's definition brings out three things in open distance learning; the separation of teaching behaviours, the separation of learning behaviours and possibility of a two-way communication. UNESCO (1997) however states that though most open and distance learning programmes are targeted at the adult population, school-age children and youths who are unable to attend the formal school system could also be beneficiaries.

In the present contemporary setting where the world has gone electronic, open distance learning has also assumed a new dimension; learning now takes place with the use of the computer, thereby facilitating communication through computer mediated instruction. This is the idea of e-learning, e-mail, and e-commerce. The features and characteristics of open learning alluded to in the definition earlier made are treated below for purposes of clarity and understanding of the concept, bearing in mind the linkages in the field of Adult Education.

3. The Principle of Learner-Centeredness

The regular or conventional institutions have rigid curriculum as well as activities; they do not put the students into consideration in terms of having direct inputs from learners who are the targets of the curriculum. Thinking, planning, and mode of implementation are done for them by so called 'Experts'. Yet, these students are expected to fit into the activities of the educational institution. What is meant by this is that the teacher is the focus of the educational process while the student is more on the passive position. Thus, it is said to be teacher-centred. The open learning however, acknowledges that the learner should be the focus of the educational process and should be regarded as an active participant from the stage of design to the accomplishment of the set task. This is the principle of learner-centeredness. This is where education is viewed, not as a transmission procedure where the flow of information is one-way (from the teacher to the student), but that the learner is also an active participant in an interactive process. The learner is not left passive! For the learner being an active participant also implies that they have choices, possibilities and can contest view points within that process. In addition, the principle of learner-centeredness implies that the education has higher potential to develop problem-solving skills and competencies that the students could directly benefit from and actualise for personal benefits and the benefits of humanity in general.

4. The Principle of Lifelong Education and Open Learning

The concept of lifelong education is emphasized in the world today. The meaning of this concept is that everybody, irrespective of age, status, present or previous educational attainment, requires education throughout one's life time rather than being limited to that which was obtained at the childhood level. The education should be of direct relevance to the needs and life experience of the learners. Thus, the slogan comes in that education is from 'cradle to grave'. That is to say, from birth unto old age one must be helped to keep learning and to keep on learning until life ceases. To this effect, an effective lifelong education programme must have a functional adult literacy component which will cater for the literacy need of illiterate adults in our communities. Adults in our communities require functional literacy skills to enable them make informed polices and decision borne out of functional knowledge of issues of state. Lifelong education cannot succeed without an effective functional adult literacy programme that has direct relevance to the needs and life experience of learners. There should always be appropriate linkages among the past, the present, and the anticipated future. No society can survive for long on random planning.

Therefore, the concept of lifelong learning acknowledges and is largely premised on the fact that learning is a process from birth until death thus an attempt to make structured educational opportunities available to people through-out their lives. Since lifelong learning is a continuous process from birth until death, it means it is not restricted to the type of learning that takes place in the traditional formal school alone. But goes beyond that to involve all forms of learning which include the traditional, vocational and their likes, which are primarily directed at self-development/actualization. It also includes the whole range of influence that people encounter all through their lives. This is why past and present experiences should be properly harness to inform adequate planning for the future.

5. The Principle of Flexibility of Learning Provision

By this concept of flexibility of learning, it does not mean that the open learning system does not or should not have a direction nor does it mean it could be conducted any how to accommodate just whatever comes in. This concept should not be misunderstood. Openness in learning however implies that the learners are given the opportunity to decide for themselves what they want to learn. It makes room for their learning needs as well as giving due consideration to mode of learning that might be suitable for the learners. This is to say that there is no rigidity as to the courses to be taken and learners are permitted to learn at their own pace without lowering the quality of the education offered. This makes it possible for learners to decide on whether to complete their course of study on full-time or part-time basis. Thus, they could omit some sections of a course which they feel is of no relevance to them; they can also space out the courses

involved in the way most convenient for then, but still within the perimeter allowance provided by the programme. Learners are therefore able to decide on their own learning objectives. They are able to learn at their own pace rather than being forced to complete modules amenable odds.

As part of flexibility of learning provision, is the liberty of learners to decide for themselves the learning methods most suited to their needs and to their style of learning. This is to say that within the range of methods and techniques available and the different ways in which education could be provided to learners, like human interaction either at a distance learning mode, a face-to-face interaction, a combination of the two, computer based training, a range of media materials which include printed materials, videos and audio cassettes they are at liberty to choose the most convenient to them. Added to this choice is that of where the learning takes place either at the comfort of one's home using the e-learning method, in a learning centre, or in a classroom setting?

In addition to the choices at their disposal, is the flexibility of the time the learners want to learn out of the time-table provided. They should be able to fit into the most convenient schedule for them rather than having to enrol on the rigid set times of the conventional school.

6. The Principle of Removal of Barriers to Access Learning

The major difference between open learning and the conventional mode of learning is the issue of barrier to access. Barriers that learners might face include rigidity of geographical isolation, discrimination on age, funds, rigid requirement on qualifications for enrolment, fixed lecture periods to mention but these. These factors mentioned above could constitute barriers to adult learners who are often older than the younger ones in the conventional setting. Often, the adult learners are on the job which is their source of income which again they depend on for their livelihood, leaving the job for educational pursuit may not be favourable. At the same time there is need for further trainings, promotions and elevations in their places of work. Thus, open distance learning provides the learners the opportunity to combine his work with his educational pursuit. This is done in the distance learning mode. Opening of learning is the acknowledgement of the existence of these barriers and the ensuring of their removal. Other intimidating barrier like geographical location is also opened with either the creation of study centres in strategic places which brings them closer to the learners or through e-learning which makes learners learn from the comfort of their homes using their computers.

7. The Principle of Learner Support

Open learning as has been discussed earlier is a programme for adult learners most of these learners as has been inferred have been out of school (either conventional or otherwise) for some time. To this effect, they have lost touch of anything academics. Thus, educational providers need to ensure adequate support to learners. This involves the provision of counselling, advice and relevant information to learners. These will be done prior to enrolment so that learners can know clearly what they are being offered, the implication of their learning choices, providing continuing support, advice and counselling throughout the learning process. All methods of reaching out to the learners should be employed. These could be through face-to-face contact, the post, computer links and the telephones. Any necessary learner support in educational courses and the encouragement of interaction between learners on both a group and a one-to-one basis should also be encouraged. Every teaching and learning strategy therefore should be measured against the extent to which it supports learners. It should be noted that open distance learning is more effective if sufficient learner support services are rendered to assist students to get more information needed for effective learning.

8. Nigeria and the Global Challenges

Global challenges are arrived at with critical analysis of nation to nation problems or critical comparisons of problems of various nations. Nigeria also has its own share of wide gap between the read and the illiterate, on issues of access to education and flexibility of learning provision. Addressing these problems now constitute challenges before adult and non-formal education. This is so because the conventional school system cannot cope nor readily provide solution.

Nigeria has not effectively provided for the education of her stark illiterate adults. It can be argued that she has not fully adopted the policy of lifelong education, which is part of the concepts of open distance education. It is important to note here that Nigeria still largely rely on crude technology or foreign technology on which there is inadequate basic expertise and experience for its proper manipulation and maintenance.

Apart from the inability to boost indigenous technology of mass communication in Nigeria there are still other problems like that of electricity (power supply) and postal services. The parastatals charged with the responsibility of providing electricity and delivering mails are not only inefficient but also ill equipped to cope with the pressing need of the jobs. As at 2013, the government of Nigeria has privatised the telecommunication system as well as the power (electricity) sector. For most part of October 2013, there was no electricity supply in most part of the country as the power sector are said to be on strike over the privatisation of the sector by the government. As such, learners depending on electricity supply by the government will have their programme on hold. Even before this strike the epileptic nature of electricity supply affects the use of the internet; except the use of personal generator which not many people can afford and/or maintain. As at this 2018 the situation is still grossly inadequate to address the issue under discussion.

Although, it may be said that open leaning is meant to serve those who attained the basic education, it may also be rightly argued that the majority and a good number of people are still living in the rural areas working as teachers, health officers, welfare officers, agricultural officers and so on. The resent insurgence, especially in the North East Nigeria,with large population concentration in the rural areas, has been adversely affected. People are so afraid to perform their duties and have been forced to go into hidings. More so with the continuous abduction of females, worthy of note are the over

200 girls of Chibok whose release has not been forth coming. The fear instilled in people with the adoption of the Dapchi School girls, in spite of Nigeria's security net-work, still lingers on. Other instructors especially females are so afraid therefore to go to the rural areas to work. The postal services in Nigeria operate skeletal services and are rather slow. Added to this is the same insecurity posed by the Boko haram sect that makes the roads not easily assessable. This makes good network road for delivery of mails is another area of concern. All these are vital ingredients to the operation of open learning. The absence of all these only contribute negatively toward the realisation of the objective of open distance learning.

Another challenge Nigeria has in the achievement of success in open distance learning is the government. Lack of relevant government policies setting priorities for adult education hampered the growth of adult education more than the lack of financial resources bearing in mind that if there was favourable government policy for adult education, there would have been at least some money to spend on it. The only flexible education form that could reach millions is the open learning process.

Open distance education technologies are expanding at an extremely rapid rate globally. However, instructional designers and curriculum developers in Nigeria are not dealing with the underlying issues of learner characteristics and needs, especially the recent wave of media influence on the instructional process, the equity of access to interactive delivery systems especially as the majority of the populace are still computer illiterates where there is poor power supply. Some of the facilitators are yet to be at home with the new role of the teacher as facilitators in the distance learning process.

9. Conclusion

The importance of Education to personal and community/national development seems less controversial. Several approaches are needed to effectively cover nations, especially a nation as Nigeria with asset diversities of people and endowments. Efforts of formal and non-formal school systems have their unique roles to play as highlighted above. With improving and embracing of technology in education propagation there has been some improvement in the number of people that could be served at a given point in time. As a result many reasons such as political disharmony, economic recession, and non-solution to topography, poor attention to educational sector, Nigeria is yet to sufficiently explore what technology offers. The virtual learning is still a big challenge in Nigeria. This is handicap to Education, particularly the open learning which thrives better with the aids of technology apparatus. There is, therefore, the need to accord Education more attention, maximise the opportunities offered by technology. Particular attention should be given to virtual learning apparatus, which will not be limited to institutions of learning but should be extended to the rural areas also. The instructional needs of the students should be more in focus, rather than on the technology itself, even though technology is an integral part of distance education.

Furthermore, facilitators of open distance learning should be exposed to, and made to recognise the existence of alternate learning styles of adults so that they can make a match between these modes and the content to be learned. Facilitators also need support to learn about new technologies, regardless of their level of class room experience. Thus, they will not feel intimidated with the new technologies, but will be adequately equipped to favourably interact with their environment. There is also the need for constant workshops which will bring beneficiaries to interact with those who are already versed in the use of the computer and other technological teaching and learning facilities.

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