



Strategies to Increase Higher Education Access in Selected Higher Education Institution

Baloyi Gezani

College of Graduate Studies, University of South Africa, South Africa

E-mail: baloygp@unisa.ac.za

<http://dx.doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v6i10.1599>

Abstract

Increasing access to higher education institutions is topical in today's society. Some institutions of higher learning are using learning management systems for teaching and learning. Technologies can assist with many challenges that student face, increase the number of enrolments without even increasing the staff members, and it can increase student support and access. Students from diverse backgrounds can be supported using technologies. For the students to succeed in higher education, universities should provide quality support to ensure success with their studies. The study has adopted a qualitative research approach to interview about 8 lecturers from a total number of 30. An interview guide, prepared in advance, was used to interview the participants. The participants have given some recommendations to improve student access in comprehensive open distance and e-learning (CODEL) contexts. They have pointed out that continuous professional development is important to ensure successful student support. Therefore, training of lecturers and students in new technologies should also be considered important. Consequently, to enhance the facilitation of teaching and learning in CODEL, the institution has mandated training for its facilitators. This move was based on the findings of recent research studies by De Santo and De Meo (2016), who indicated that tutors should understand the online learning environment and how it is mediated by the new technologies. The training of lecturers will make them understand how to support students on the LMS. Many studies have shown some digital competencies that facilitators should possess, namely, monitoring student's learning by giving ongoing student support, interpersonal, technical problems, being able to create a learning community on LMS, identifying and solving a variety of problems, etc. Therefore, training of both lecturers and students is crucial in CODEL contexts.

Keywords: *Strategy; Higher Education; Access; E-Learning; Comprehensive Open Distance and E-Learning*

Introduction

In Holmberg's Guided Didactic Conversation Theory (1983), the distance gap is bridged by the guided conversation (Birochi & Pozzebon, 2011:566). Holmberg (1983) proposed actions related to interpersonal communication in his theory of guided didactic conversation. Dialogue should be grounded in strategies such as empathy-based conversation, which aim to recreate ties between learners and teachers by means of simulated communication. Motivation of students became a critical point in teaching and learning. According to Holmberg, dialogue between instructors and learners is one of a group of strategies, which traditionally belongs to the didactic discipline under an educational umbrella (Birochi & Pozzebon, 2011:569). Siemens' Connectivism is discussed in the next section.

Teaching and learning theories, for example, behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism, are the theories used in learning or instructional environments. The theories were postulated in times before they were impacted by technology (Siemens, 2014; 2005).

Technology connects diverse students in teaching and learning. Siemens postulates the Theory of Connectivism; hence, he is regarded as the father of Connectivism in the global communities (Siemens 2004:4). The Theory of Connectivism plays an important role in offering flexible learning. However, Connectivism should not be confused with other theories, for example, constructivism. Siemens (2004:4) advances a theory of learning that is consistent with the needs of the 21st century. Siemens' theory takes into account current trends in learning. It combines relevant elements of many learning theories, social structures and technology to create a powerful theoretical construct for learning in the digital age. Since it is an alternative system of education, Siemens emphasised the opening of opportunities by overcoming barriers that result from geographical isolation, personal or work commitments, or conventional course structures, which have often prevented people from realising their educational goals. The online module offers flexible learning because students learn at any time, at any place. Online learning is part of their plan to improve access.

The previous section discussed Connectivism as an online theory, which underpinned the study. The following section will discuss Community of Inquiry as the main theory underpinning this study.

Community of Inquiry Theory

The researcher chose Community of Inquiry because students form a community of learning on the myUnisa learning management system. The theory has cognitive, social and teaching presence, which all relate to student support on the learning management system. Garrison et al. (2000) coined the Community of Inquiry theoretical framework. The theory measures three presences, namely, social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. These elements and their areas of overlap appear in the iconic diagram of the Community of Inquiry framework. According to Garrison et al. (2010), this framework emerged in the specific context of computer conferencing in higher education, that is, asynchronous, text-based group discussions, rather than from a traditional distance education theoretical perspective, which assumed that students work independently from each other (Garrison et al., 2010:4). The Community of Inquiry framework is generic in that it is conceptually grounded in theories of teaching and learning in higher education (Garrison et al., 2010:5). It has been stated that the two constituting notions of Community of Inquiry form a pragmatic organising framework of sustainable principles and processes, for the purpose of guiding online educational practice (Swan, Garrison & Richardson, 2009). Philosophically, the Community of Inquiry framework is consistent with John Dewey's work on community and inquiry.

In this model, different presences, namely, cognitive, teaching and social presences are stated as important (Anderson et al., 2000). The theory related well with the myUnisa learning management

system. Most institutions are using learning management systems for teaching and learning. Unisa uses the myUnisa learning management system for teaching and learning. Learning management systems offer flexible learning and promote student-centredness.

The theory provided a conceptual framework that would provide order, heuristic, understanding and a methodology for studying the potential and effectiveness of computer conferencing. The basic premise and goal of this theory of formal education, consistent with the potential of computer conferencing, was the creation and sustainability of a community of inquiry. The goal was to define, describe and measure elements of a collaborative and worldwide educational experience. It must be noted that it is a process model (Garrison et al., 2010:6).

Looking at the discussion and assumptions of the theory, Community of Inquiry in online learning offers flexible learning to students. To engage in group discussion forums and other learning activities, requires internet connectivity. In this theory, students form a community, there is student-to-student interaction, and teaching and learning happens within the community. Therefore, technical challenges, for example, when the myUnisa learning management system is down, logging in, the inability to follow instruction and to use computer facilities can pose a threat to learner success in the module. The lecturers and teaching assistants facilitate teaching and learning activities online. This perspective is important and relevant for this study, because it connects the students and the lecturers in this community.

Selection of Participants

The participants for this study were selected using purposive sampling. De Vos (2002:207) defines purposive sampling in qualitative inquiry as a sample that is composed of elements that contain the most characteristics, representative or typical attributes of the population. Nieuwenhuis (2016), in Kobus et al. (2016:84), notes that the number of participants selected depends on the research questions, the type of research design, the skill and experience of the researcher, and the time and funds available to conduct the research. Some of the main problems often experienced are that novice researchers are so keen to complete the data collection (Kobus et al., 2016:84).

The researcher approached sampling with a funnelling approach, to purposefully select more participants that would be needed and conduct an exploratory interview with them. This reveals cases where sound expertise, rich experience, detailed knowledge and the ability to convey these verbally, exists. These will become the focus of your data collection strategy, while the other participants are a type of reserve force should one of the identified decide to withdraw from the process. It was not the intention of the study to select the participants on gender; female participants were available to participate in the research study and male participants were, mostly, not available.

Participants for this study were limited to lecturers and teaching assistants, who were responsible for teaching the signature module in an undergraduate programme in the College of Education. The participants were selected based on their teaching experience in supporting students in the module.

Four (4) teaching assistants and two (2) lecturers were invited to be participants by e-mail invitation. Four (4) teaching assistants and two (2) lecturers accepted the invitation. The participants are based in the Department of Curriculum Studies where the module, Being a Professional Teacher (BPT1501) is housed. The selection of teaching assistants and lecturers was based on gender, experience with lecturing the signature module and their different roles in the online module. The researcher employed purposive sampling, which Chilisa and Preece (2005:170) describe as a researcher selecting a targeted type of participants (Terre Blanche et al., 2006:304). The participants were chosen according to their knowledge of student support in online learning.

Sampling, according to Kerlinger (1986), means taking any portion of a population or universe as a representative of that population or universe. The definition does not say that the sample taken – or drawn, as researchers say – is in fact representative. Rather, the sample taken is considered to be representative. It is important to understand the concept representativeness and its relationship to generalisability (Graziano & Raulin in Devos et al., 2007:195). Niewenhuisen (in Kobus et al., 2016:85) says that qualitative research, in general, makes use of purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is precisely what the name suggests. Members of a sample are chosen with a “purpose” to represent a phenomenon, group, incident, location or type in relation to a key criterion (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). A key aspect of purposive sampling lies with the criteria used as the basis for sampling.

MacMillan and Schumacher (2014:352) mention that qualitative samples can range from one to 40 or more. Typically, a qualitative sample seems small compared with the sample needed to generate to a larger population. The logic of the sample size is related to the purpose, the research problem, the major data collection strategy and the availability of information-rich or cases. The following are guidelines for determining sample size, the purpose of the study, focus of the study and primary data collection strategy.

Data Collection

Data was collected from the lecturers and teaching assistants who were responsible for the signature course during the face-to-face interviews. Ethical considerations were explained to the participants and consent given to voluntarily participate in the study. The participants were given consent forms to sign, just before the interviews. During the interviews, the participants’ responses were recorded by audio-recorder (digital recorder). The data will be stored in hard copies and electronically on the researcher’s desktop for five years. It will be in a secured location or file that is password protected.

Data Analysis

All data collected by electronic or digital means (such as audio or video recordings) must be transcribed and this is best done by the researcher himself, as he will most probably include some non-verbal clues in the transcript. Audio recordings must be transcribed verbatim, that is, written down word-for-word (Nieuwenhuis in Kobus et al., 2016:115). The researcher transcribed the audio clips of the participants interviewed into a MS Word document. The collected data was organised, compared and analysed, after it was transcribed.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Bless, Higson-Smith and Kagee (2006:143) say the principle of anonymity is linked with confidentiality. A participant’s data must not be associated immediately and obviously with his or her name, or any other identifier.

The settings and participants should not be identifiable in print. Therefore, locations and features of settings are typically disguised to appear similar to several possible places, and researchers routinely code names of people and places. Officials and participants should review a report before it is finally released. Researchers have a dual responsibility to protect the individual’s confidentials from other persons in the setting and to protect the informants from the general reading public.

It is very important to gain permission to enter the field that has been decided on. This is of prime importance in order to get the study started. Gaining access to a community can be problematic, since a researcher is expected to avoid disturbing the community as far as possible. The researcher’s presence should be made known in too obtrusive a manner (De Vos et al., 2005:279).

The participants were asked to complete informed consent forms, which they signed and returned to the researcher, thereby acknowledging that they were satisfied with the criteria on the consent forms (Flick, 2007:68). With regards to obtaining informed consent, Flick (2007:72) states that a mutual contract should be prepared and such contract details should include the purpose of the research, the expectations of the participants regarding being interviewed and the data collection process.

Data Presentation and Discussions

Understanding of the Concept of E-Learning

The following sub-themes were identified from the first research question, which focuses on the understanding of student support using the e-learning mode, namely, modern technology, online learning, digital learning and virtual learning.

(a) Modern Technology

Unisa has evolved over the years with different generations of students, namely, first generation, second generation, third generation, fourth generation and fifth generation (Moore & Kearsley, 2012:43). Currently, the institution is on the fifth generation, which uses internet to support the students. It is imperative for teaching assistants and the lecturers to understand the profile of the students in order to support them. The question was asked in order to understand student support in ODeL. The participants have diverse definitions of modern technology in e-learning.

On this theme, a lecturer defined e-learning as follows:

E-learning is a form of offering teaching and learning using electronic media, which can be supported by Internet in anyway. You can use your computer, smart phone or tablet to access teaching and learning online.

The response given suggests that the participant understands the concept of e-learning, but there is limited understanding in terms of student support in ODeL context. The response further suggested that more work should be done to equip teaching assistants to support students in the ODeL context.

(b) Online Learning

Unisa has embarked on an e-learning journey since 2011. Unisa is an ODL institution and uses an open distance and e-learning model to reach out to the multitudes of students. The university registers a diverse student body irrespective of race, colour or creed (Unisa, 2011). Previously, Unisa used to register mature students who were working and could not leave their job to study full time. However, currently, the institution registers younger students who need to be supported at all times. In its ODeL mode, Unisa also provides higher education to students who are in the rural areas, who previously did not have an opportunity to be admitted to residential institutions. The module is online, has more than 10 000 students, and students submit their assignments and portfolios on myUnisa.

The teaching assistant, who is highly experienced in the module, described the concept of online learning as follows:

In online learning you can communicate with the person all the time online, it is like it is face-to-face, we don't give them attention like they study online. You speak to them directly, like sending an email, you post answers.

The response from the participant also showed that there is more work to be done to teach teaching assistants about their role in supporting students in an ODeL context.

Recommendation as a Theme

The participants have raised several recommendations for this online module. They mentioned that the signature module should be continuously improved in order to remain credible. Continuous professional development emerged as a sub-theme from this theme.

(a) Continuous Professional Development

The participants indicated that continuous professional development of staff should be ongoing to ensure student support.

Teaching Assistant 1:

To organise a workshop or course to prepare students for the course. It might be possible to give more time, may be an extra day, or more hours, during which students can do a computer course before they register. It is just that they are not knowledgeable; most of them start to improve when they submit their third assignment.

Teaching Assistant 3:

I think e-learning is amazing, so important, like I have said earlier, students who did not have access to higher learning now have, it is also important for other TAs to support them in a greater way to support and encourage them to do well in their studies.

Summary of Empirical Findings

The rationale for this research was to explore the role of student support in a specific ODeL context as one of the strategies to increase access. The study further explained how the research methodology was conducted using qualitative methods. The study further discussed the research design, research methods, reliability, validity and ethical issues.

Data was collected from the lecturers and teaching assistants using face-to-face interviews . The data was analysed, presented and the researcher showed how it was coded, organised, categorised and how the themes were identified.

The concept of trustworthiness in qualitative research was defined by the researcher and determined by four concepts, namely, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

The research findings were discussed under themes and presented in categorised sub-themes. The following sub-themes were identified from the first main theme, which focused on the understanding of student support using the e-learning mode: modern technology in teaching and learning, online learning, digital learning and virtual learning. The responses given suggest that the participants do not always understand the concept of e-learning, but there is an understanding in terms of student support in an ODeL context. The responses further suggest that more work should be done to equip teaching assistants to support students in an open distance and e-learning context.

Lecturers are module leaders who act as overseers for teaching and learning activities. Lecturers, as module leaders, deal with administration activities of the module on a day-to-day basis. The institution

employed teaching assistants, who are responsible for teaching and supporting students, on a contractual basis. Therefore, managing time for both students and teaching assistants becomes crucial in this context. Unisa does not offer full-time classes and it is, therefore, imperative for students to manage their time for teaching and learning activities. The lecturer shared information on how the module is administered in the programme.

The ODeL model offers flexible teaching and learning. The students interacted with lecturers and teaching assistants, anywhere and anytime. Teaching and learning took place on myUnisa. All the Unisa modules are linked on the myUnisa learning management system. ODeL gives students an opportunity to learn at their own time, if they are working.

According to the participants, students who have registered for the signature module are facing challenges in their teaching and learning.

The participants have raised that the signature module should be continuously improved in order to remain credible. The following sub-theme emerged from the theme recommendations: continuous professional development. Almost all participants indicated that continuous professional development of staff should be ongoing to ensure student support.

How do Lecturers Support Students in ODL?

The sub-themes were identified from the research question, which focused on the understanding of student support in open distance and e-learning mode. Unisa evolved through the different generations and now the institution is in an era of internet use. It is important for lecturers and teaching assistants to have an understanding of e-learning in ODL. Therefore, the question was asked in order to understand how lecturers support students in ODeL. The response given suggested that the participants fairly understand the concept of e-learning, but there is limited understanding in terms of student support in the open distance and e-learning context. The response further suggested that more work should be done to equip teaching assistants to support students in ODeL.

The participants use the concept of online learning and e-learning interchangeably. The participants agree that the module is offered on the myUnisa learning management system, but they need more understanding on how to support the students. Some participants raised the issue of monitoring and tracking students in an ODeL context.

How Do Lecturers Support Online Students?

The question was asked to find out how the module is administered to support the students in online learning. Lecturers were module leaders who acted as overseers for teaching and learning activities. The lecturers were not directly responsible for teaching the module, but they dealt with the administration of the module. They indicated that they receive and direct student queries to the teaching assistants. Lecturers were responsible for writing tutorial letters for the module and discussing it with teaching assistants, who were responsible for teaching and learning activities. It is evident that there should be a good communication between the teaching assistants and the lecturers. Lecturers trained teaching assistants to support students and to be on the same level with them. The lecturers indicated that they do not participate in the discussion forum; they just see, monitor and direct the discussion forum. Since lecturers were developing tutorial letters and were not directly teaching students, it is clear that there should be a need for proper guidance and support from the lecturers. From the responses in the study, it became evident that teaching assistants are responsible for teaching the students.

What Are the Positive Impacts of Teaching Assistants in Online Module?

The teaching assistants are employed to teach and support students in the signature module. Teaching assistants provide a pedagogical support to increase the throughput rate of the module. They monitor and evaluate the teaching and learning activities. Teaching assistants log in online every day to answer questions that students have asked. They monitor teaching in the discussion forum. The students are allocated to the teaching assistants for teaching and learning. Teaching assistants are allocated a certain quota of students to guide and support with assessments.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The participants have raised that the signature module should be continuously improved in order to remain credible. The following sub-theme, continuous professional development emerged from the theme recommendations. The participants indicated that continuous professional development of staff should be ongoing to ensure student support. The findings suggested that they must be given hours or days for a computer course, before they register the module.

There should be student monitoring to ensure success. The feedback should be given to students promptly. The students should be made aware that plagiarism is a punishable offence. In addressing plagiarism, the lecturers and teaching assistants must revise assignments timeously. The lecturers should come up with new assessment activities to curb plagiarism.

The students need to be properly informed about the online nature of the signature module. Some are just surprised when they have already registered for the module. The students need to be informed, before they even register, that this is an online module. Also, students should be taught computer literacy before registering for the module. This will enable the students to understand and learn skills to, for example, attach documents, write an e-mail, convert a word to PDF document, etc.

Lecturers should put systems and structures of the signature module in place right from the beginning. There should be proper communication between the lecturers and the teaching assistants.

References

- Birochi, R. & Pozzebon, M. 2011. Theorizing in Distance Education: The Critical Quest for Conceptual Foundations. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 7(4), 562–575.
- Bless, C, Higson-Smith, C & Kagee, A. 2006. *Fundamentals of social science methods: An African perspective (4th ed)*. Cape Town: Juta
- Chilisa, B & Preece, J. 2005. *Research methods for adult education in Africa*. Cape Town: Unesco:
- De Santo, M & De Meo, A. 2016. E-tutoring for the CLIL teacher: E-Tutoring and cooperation in a Moodle – based community of learning. *Journal of E-learning and Knowledge Society*, 12 (3),41 – 49
- De Vos, A.S. 2005. *Research at grassroots*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- De Vos, A.S. 2000. *Research at grass roots: a primer for the caring professions*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- De Vos, A. 2002. Intervention Research. In De Vos AS, Ed, *Research at Grass Roots: for the Social Sciences and Human Services Professions*, 2nd Edition, Van Schaik, Pretoria, 114 – 126

- Flick, U. 2007. *Designing qualitative research*. London: Sage
- Garrison, D.R., Anderson, T. & Archer, W. 2000. Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2-3), 87–105.
- Garrison, D.R., Anderson, T. & Archer, W. 2001. Critical thinking, cognitive presence, and computer conferencing in distance education. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 15(1), 7–23.
- Kerlinger, F. 1986. *Foundation of behavioral research (3rd ed)*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Maree, K. 2016. *First Steps in Research*. Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers
- McMillan, J.H. & Schumacher, S. 2014. *Research in education: evidence based inquiry*. Boston: Pearson.
- Moore, M.G. & Kearsley, G. 2012. *Distance education: A systems view of online learning (3rd ed.)*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Nieuwenhuis, J. 2007. Qualitative research designs and data gathering techniques. In Maree, J.G. (ed.). *First steps in research*. 70–97. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Nieuwenhuis, J. 2010. *Introducing qualitative research*. In Maree, K. (ed.). *Steps in Research*. 47–68. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Nieuwenhuis, J. 2016. Qualitative research designs and data gathering techniques. In Maree K (Ed). *First Steps in research (2nd ed, pp 71 – 102)*. Van Schaik.
- Ritchie, J. & Lewis, J. (eds). 2003. *Qualitative research practice: a guide for social science students and researchers*. London: Sage.
- Siemens, G. & Baker, RSJD. 2012. *LAK 12 Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Learning Analytics and Knowledge*, pp 252–254.
- Siemens, G. 2004. *Connectivism: A Learning Theory for a Digital Age*. http://www.itdl.org/journal/jan_05/article01.htm.
- Siemens, G. 2014. *Connectivism: A Learning Theory for the Digital Age*. Retrieved 21st March 2017.
- Swan, K, Garrison, D.R & Richardson, J.C. 2009. A constructivist Approach to Online learning: The Community of Inquiry Framework. In Payne, C.R.(ed.). *Information Technology and Constructivism in Higher Education: Progressive Learning frameworks* IGI Global.
- University of South Africa. 2011. *Unisa Annual Report 2011*. Letter from the Unisa Chancellor. P. 3

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).