

Analysing the Validity of Misconceptions about Open and Distance Learning among High school teachers in Mashonaland Central Province of Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This study identifies a set of misconceptions about distance education among high school teachers in Mashonaland Central of Zimbabwe. These misconceptions were verified quantitatively with 60 systematic randomly selected high school teachers who guide students on tertiary enrolment selection. Data were collected using questionnaire and interview and analysed using simple percentages and content analysis. The findings showed that the misconceptions which had higher ranking values among the respondents were: ODL is an opportunistic form of learning for average or less intelligent students (60 or 100%); ODL as a mode of learning with low quality assurance (58 or 96.7%); ODL as inferior form of learning since it is technology-mediated (56 or 93.3%) and less vigorous in comparison with the conventional mode of learning (56 or 93.3%). The study recommended, among others, that marketing and workshops should be organized for high school teachers, and high school students on the importance of distance learning at tertiary level.

Keywords: *Misconceptions, Distance education, high school teachers.*

Introduction

The advertisement in a Swedish newspaper in 1833, which touted the opportunity of people to study composition through the medium of the post, signaled the birth and the roots of distance education as an alternative form of educational provision (Holmberg, 1995). The efforts of Isaac Pittman who employed England's newly established penny post in 1840 to offer shorthand instruction to people through correspondence and that of Toussaint and Langenscheidt, who both began the teaching of languages by correspondence from Berlin, in Germany in 1842 began to change the mindset of educational policy makers and practitioners that distance education can indeed become a standard component of educational provision.

Similarly, the development and application of technological media for educational purposes such as the print, radio, and television broadcast as well as non- broadcast audio and visual aids provided a great impetus for the growth and acceptability of distance education universally. In the same vein, the rapid advances, in the recent past, in sophisticated interactive communication and telecommunication technologies such as: electronic mail, (email), bulletin board systems (BBSs), the internet, telephone- based audio conferencing and video conferencing with 1- or 2- way video and 2-way audio via broadcast cable, telephone, fiber optics, satellite, micro and closed- circuit or low power television and my Vista accelerated the recognition accorded distance education as an alternative educational delivery worldwide (Schlosser & Simonson, 2002). Thus, as resources shrink and learning requirements expand many educational institutions are relying on communication technologies to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of education (Ameritech, 1996). These telecommunication media have, in essence, become very convenient and cost- effective ways to facilitate teaching and learning (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). This has led, according to Morrison, (1996), to an increasing number of students who want and need non- traditional, flexible schedules of learning. As a result, electronic learning, web-based learning, and virtual learning are becoming more irresistible and popular among learners on a daily basis. The conclusion of Taylor, (2002) is that “ distance education is becoming a common practice as evidenced by the number of universities that offer distance education programs, the number of businesses offering distance education and training programs, and the number of distance learning projects that are being created or are currently in use worldwide.”

Distance education and open learning has continued to attract international attention and recognition by educational policy makers and practitioners across the world. Dias, (1997) purports that the subsequent expansion of the respective open and distance learning institutions and programmes is the most remarkable development in the field of education and training in recent years. There is no doubt that distance education and open learning has established itself as an integral part of the educational delivery systems worldwide with the establishment of many integrated and a few dedicated distance education institutions.

Examples of integrated distance learning institutions in Southern Africa include: the Distance Learning UNISA in South Africa, Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) in Zimbabwe, UNZA University of Zambia in Zambia to mention just a few in Southern Africa: Invariably, the increasing recognition of the place and role of distance education and open learning, popularly perceived as Open and Distance Learning (ODL), was clearly specified by different governments when they asserted that the goals of Distance Education are; to:

- Provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied.
- Meet special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees at their workplace.

- Encourage internationalization, especially of tertiary education curricula.
- Ameliorate the effect of internal and external brain drain in tertiary institutions by utilizing local experts as teachers regardless of their locations or places of work.

The potential roles of Open and Distance Learning in national systems of education have been perceived by Rumble, 1989 and Ljosa, 1992 as:

- Balancing inequalities between age groups.
- Extending geographical access to education.
- Dealing with educational campaigns and regular education for large audiences.
- Providing speedy and efficient training for key target groups.
- Providing education for otherwise neglected populations.
- Expanding the capacity for education in new and multidisciplinary subject areas.
- Offering the combination of education with work and family life.
- Developing multiple competencies through recurrent and continuing education.
- Enhancing the international dimension of educational experience, and
- Improving the quality of existing education services.

Teaching can be conducted and learning can be acquired through space-time instantiation and through space-time Distanciation. In the former, the teacher is physically present with the learners in the presentation of information and knowledge to the learners; and in the latter, the teacher is quasi- permanently separated from the learners. The difference between the two is the space-time dimension. Prior to the development of distance education, teaching and learning always took place in the same space and at the same time. This is what Jarvis, (1997) called the space-time instantiation. However, Giddens, (1990) argued that distanciation is now prevalent where teaching materials prepared in one place are learned in another and at another time. It is regarded as advantageous to the students because they can study at their convenience. Space-time distanciation is clearly relevant to distance education since it has always involved a separation between teachers and learners. Similarly, Harvey, (1990) utilized the idea of space-time compression to depict the teaching and learning process in distance education. He argued that with distance education, people can and do consume information from all over the world and educational institutions are becoming global in their orientation and so time and space are compressed into the global village. To those who were tutored through the space- time instantiation mode, the emergence of the space-time distanciation mode is, therefore, an aberration, more so that distance education is regarded as a form of mass education after the analysis provided by the German scholar Otto Peters in 1994. He had, through his analysis, argued that the production and distribution of distance education materials is by mass production through the industrial production techniques which to the critics amounted to trivializing the process of education. This probably informed the reason for the various dimensions of the misconceptions about distance education and the scornful treatment accorded distance learners by high school teachers. Irrespective of the various dimensions of the misconceptions, there is no

doubt that distance education has been well grounded in terms of definitions. Therefore, the issue of misconceptions about distance education is beyond that of definitions.

In Zimbabwe distance education was introduced in the early 90s, as an opportunity to acquire university education without leaving the shores of the country. In Zimbabwe, Distance and Open Learning have been in existence from as far back as the 1930s. Among some of the institutions that claim a long history in the provision of distance and non-formal education is the Government Primary Correspondence School, Rapid Results College, Central Africa Correspondence College (CACC), Zimbabwe Distance Education College (ZDECO). These colleges are mainly tuition providers which do not administer exams. Its students are required to register with examining bodies where they will sit for exams. To this date, the school still operates along the same principles. Students send in application forms to register for the same pre-packaged curriculum as offered in formal schools (i.e. students register for Mathematics, English, Environmental Studies, Social Studies, Religious Studies, Shona, Ndebele, Art and Physical Education and other curriculum subjects). Such students are then required to have supervisors who may be their parents. Supervisors are not employees of the government but the school employs qualified and experienced teachers whose responsibility is to develop learning material, mark students' work and give them detailed feedback.

To date, the study groups are still running successfully and the colleges pride themselves on the achievements of the programmes. In addition to the non-formal education programmes mentioned above, there is also a growing number of public and private institutions offering secondary and tertiary education by distance. Among such institutions are Institute for Personnel Management (IPMZ from South Africa), International Correspondence School, Distance Education Centre and Open Learning Centre (from UK) and Zimbabwe Open University. These institutions have been registered with the Ministries of Education and Higher Education respectively.

Zimbabwe Open University is revolutionizing the provision of distance education at tertiary level in Zimbabwe. It has already established meaningful relationships with other ODL institutions for example University of Zambia (UNZA) offering masters programmes. To this effect, ZOU is already offering a good number of undergraduate diplomas, undergraduate and post-graduate degrees including Ph.D. in in most of its faculties.

Similarly, distance education is contemporarily being employed as a means of widening access to educational opportunities to many who had and are being denied admission into the conventional universities in Zimbabwe. Focusing on the conventional universities, in Zimbabwe, more than 50% of High school leavers who apply for admission into the conventional universities are never offered admission. Invariably, majority of the left-over's supposed to seek university education through the distance education mode. Thus, distance education is playing complementary role to the conventional university in the provision of educational opportunity to those who would have been denied.

However, despite the phenomenal growth and acceptability of distance education worldwide, this form of learning (which has helped in broadening and widening educational access as championed by John Dewey and other progressive philosophers in America (Rorty, 1982) since early 1920's) has been misconceived or misrepresented in different ways in different quarters. This is evident in Zimbabwe from the low enrolments of high school leavers who embark on tertiary programmes through distance learning. High school students spent most of their time with teachers who acquaint them with relevant skills and knowledge and provide guidance for future career opportunities. Could these high school teachers have misconceptions about distance learning? Focusing on low enrolments of former high school students in distance learning institutions, there is no doubt that distance education has not been accepted, by high school teachers and students, as a standard and alternative component of educational delivery due to either the misconceptions they have about this form of learning or the misinformation they have been indoctrinated with (Ojokheta, 2009). This, therefore, calls for a study to examine the common misconceptions about distance education especially from high school teachers who spent most of their time with students with a view of correcting the misconceptions. This study was, in essence, carried-out with the aim of achieving this purpose.

The objectives of the study were, to:

- Find-out the common misconceptions that high school teachers have about open and distance learning
- Determine which of the misconceptions has the greatest comparative value in the estimation of the respondents
- Ascertain, in the discussion of findings, the reasons responsible for these misconceptions and the common manifestations exhibited by high school teachers to ODL programmes as a result of these misconceptions
- Suggest possible ways through which high school teachers can be made to have a positive mindset towards open and distance learning and accept it as a standard as well as alternative component of the educational system.

Research Questions guiding the study were:

- What are the common misconceptions that high school teachers have about open and distance learning?
- Which of these misconceptions has the greatest comparative value in the estimation of the respondents?

- What are the reasons responsible for these misconceptions and the common manifestations exhibited by high school teachers to ODL programmes as a result of these misconceptions?
- What are the possible ways through which school teachers can be made to have a positive mindset towards open and distance learning?

Methodology

The study adopted a mixed methods methodology and the descriptive survey design. The population under study was 206 qualified high school teachers from 16 high schools in Mashonaland Central Province of Zimbabwe. The sample constituted 60 high school teachers systematically and randomly selected from 16 high schools. The sample was a representation of all departments in high schools. Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect and generate data. Data collected were analyzed using simple percentages and content analysis.

Results and Discussion of Findings

Research Question One

Research question one sought to find out the common misconceptions about open and distance learning among high school teachers. They were asked to write out their fears about open and distance learning and the following were identified and collated: • Learning of low quality assurance because of the physical distance between the tutors and the learners. • True learning takes place with the physical presence of the tutor; any other learning form from this arrangement is inferior learning • True learning cannot be mediated by technology • Less vigorous in comparison with the conventional mode of learning since the content of learning cannot be adequately covered within short period of face-to-face contact • It is opportunistic form of learning for average or less intelligent students • In-depth knowledge acquisition is unachievable through ODL • ODL is not suited for practical learning • Progress of learning cannot be systematically monitored, determined or measured • Measures only the cognitive dimension of learning while the psychomotor dimensions are sacrificed • Evaluation of learning is less vigorous due to the consideration accorded the competing demands of learners • It is adult learners dominated.

Research Question Two

Research question two aimed at determining which of these misconceptions has the greatest comparative value in the estimation of the respondents. The table below showed the findings of this research question. The respondents were asked to rank their view on each variable using 1-11 ranking scale. 1 represented the highest value while 11 represented the least value.

Variable.	No. of Respondents	Frequency Value
Learning of low quality assurance because it isolates learners from their tutors	58	96.7%
Inferior form of learning	56	93.3%
Technology-mediated and therefore not true learning.	56	93.3%
Less vigorous in comparison with the conventional mode of learning	56	93.3%
In-depth knowledge acquisition is unachievable through ODL.	60	100%
It is opportunistic form of learning for average or less intelligent students.	53	88.3%
Not suited for practical learning.	52	86.7%
Progress of learning cannot be systematically monitored, determined or measured.	53	88.3%
Measures only cognitive dimension of learning while the affective and psychomotor dimensions are sacrificed.	55	91.7%
Evaluation of learning is less vigorous due to the consideration accorded the competing demands of learners.	53	88.3%
It is adult learners dominated.	54	90.0%

The table above showed that the misconception which had the highest ranking among the respondents was that ODL is an opportunistic form of learning for average or less intelligent students (60 or 100%). The implication of this is that it is only less intelligent students that embrace ODL. The intelligent individuals will never learn through this mode of learning. This probably informed the respondents' perception of ODL as a mode of learning with low quality assurance because it isolates the learners from their tutors. This was the second misconception

that had greater ranking value among the respondents (58 or 96.7%). ODL was also perceived as inferior form of learning, not a true learning mode since it is more of technology -mediated, and, therefore, less vigorous in comparison with the conventional mode of learning. These three misconceptions had the same ranking value from the respondents (56 or 93.3%). The next misconception which followed in the ranking order of the respondents was the perception that ODL measures the cognitive dimension of learning while the affective and psychomotor dimensions are often sacrificed (55 or 91.7%). This was followed by the belief that ODL is adult learners dominated. That is, this form of learning is not meant for the young and the adolescent learners (54 or 90.0%). It is also believed by the respondents that in-depth knowledge acquisition is unattained through ODL, progress of learning difficult to monitor, determine, or measure and evaluation of learning less vigorous due to the consideration accorded the competing demands of learners. These three misconceptions had the same ranking value from the respondents (53 or 88.3%). Finally, the misconception that had the lowest ranking value from the respondents was that ODL is not situated for practical learning (52 or 86.7%). In other words, it is only the theoretical aspect of learning that can only be covered by ODL programmes.

Research Question Three

Research question three sought to find out the reasons responsible for these misconceptions and the common manifestations exhibited by high school teachers to ODL programmes as a result of these misconceptions. Findings got from formal discussions with the respondents show that:

Most of the respondents passed through the conventional mode of education and, therefore, to them, any alternative educational mode of learning or delivery is unconventional and non-traditional. 2. The respondents have not been well informed about the phenomenon and goals of distance education which are; to: provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied, meet special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees at their workplace, encourage internationalization, especially of tertiary education curricula, ameliorate the effect of internal and external brain drain in tertiary institutions by utilizing Zimbabwean experts as tutors regardless of their locations or places of work.

Similarly, in order to ascertain the common manifestations exhibited by high school teachers to ODL programmes at Zimbabwe Open University, the researcher had a formal discussion with some of the high school teachers. The result obtained, from the discussion, revealed that the teachers most times: perceive distance learning students as adults and second class students and inferior as compared to conventional students since ODL students are left to vegetate.

Some of the teachers disregarded this form of learning to young school leavers since they still require schooling environment due to age and social responsibility factors.

Research Question Four

Research question four was conceived to find out the possible ways through which high school teachers can be made to have a positive mindset towards open and distance learning. Findings were not conclusive on this. However, it was discovered that distance learning institutions in Zimbabwe need to institute some strategic plans for enhancing the acceptability of ODL as a standard and alternative educational delivery especially among high school teachers.

Discussion of Findings

The results obtained from this study simply showed that the respondents had myopic, invalid, and misleading perceptions of open and distance learning. For example, it is misleading for anyone to perceive ODL as a learning process embraced by the average and less intelligent students. As stated earlier, the early educated Zimbabweans among others got their degrees through ODL, then known as correspondence education. Former ODL students in Zimbabwe occupied high positions in the government and non-governmental organizations. They were highly recognized and revered individuals who, at one time or the other, occupy positions of higher authority and play distinguishable roles in the political, economic, and social history of the country. It is well known that these notable citizens of the country are not average or less intelligent individuals.

It is also misleading to perceive ODL as inferior learning with low quality assurance. For example, distance learning programmes of Zimbabwe Open University are subjected to the same quality assurance mechanisms as that of conventional programmes. The same lecturers teach both the conventional and distance learning students who are exposed to the same curriculum contents. The students are made to write similar examinations and evaluated through the same yardsticks or parameters by the governing board Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education ZIMCHE which promote and coordinate quality assurance, standards and evaluate institutions. They are equally awarded the same certificates and are both admitted, without discriminations, for postgraduate programmes. Therefore, the distance learning students are exposed to in-depth knowledge and skill acquisition just as the conventional students since they are evaluated with the same techniques and criteria. Hence, it will be wrong for anyone to perceive ODL as not representing true form of learning simply because it is more technology mediated or because the tutor is not physically presented with the learners in space and time over a period of time. In essence, the issues of low quality assurance, evaluation not vigorously pursued like that of the conventional programmes, and ODL representing a debased form of learning are invalid and misleading statements and perceptions. It can even be said that ODL is much more vigorous than conventional programmes if viewed from the angle that distance learning students are expected to combine their academic activities with that of their various responsibilities and competing demands.

Similarly, the perception that ODL is adult learners' dominated judging from the parameters of adulthood as specified in adult education is completely a falsehood. This shows that it is a misleading assertion by high school teachers that ODL is only oriented for adult learners

The misconceptions about ODL emanated simply because most of the present set of high school teachers were trained in conventional colleges. This probably informed the reasons why they had such misconceptions about ODL. Arising from these established misconceptions, it is so obvious that distance learning institutions in Zimbabwe particularly Zimbabwe Open University need to come up with institutional strategic plans for enhancing the acceptability of ODL among high school leavers and teachers. To achieve this, the following recommendations are suggested:

Recommendations

A comprehensive handbook specifying the meaning, features, scope, advantages, role, and technologies of distance learning should be written by each distance learning institution and distributed to all high schools for proper understanding of this mode of educational delivery. *f* This should be followed with workshops programme for high school teachers where renowned experts in open and distance learning will be invited to talk. This should be done periodically. *f* High school teachers can be sponsored to attend nationally and internationally organized workshops and conferences on open and distance/ electronic learning in order to have more knowledge and understanding of this alternative educational component. *f*

Open and distance tutors can be encouraged to actively participate in community projects and serve in community sub-committees (such as: academic planning, environmental health in order to change the mindset of teachers and community. Marketing should be done regularly by ODL staff to high school teachers, students and the community for awareness concerning this mode of learning.*f*

Conclusion

This study has been able to establish how high school teachers perceive open and distance learning on a general term. In probing the validity of this perception, the study has equally established the misconceptions associated with this perception arising most significantly from the educational background of the respondents. To a significant extent, these misconceptions explain the reasons why high school teachers often cast a doubt on open and distance learning as an alternative educational component. It is, therefore, instructive to state that there is the urgent need for open and distance learning institutions to create or institute a greater and massive awareness drive towards positive branding and re-branding of this mode of educational delivery and distance learning programme.

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