LECTURERS' INTERPRETIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF E-LEARNING AS A KEY PEDAGOGICAL INSTRUMENT AT GREAT ZIMBABWE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract— **This research examined lecturers' views on the strategic role of E-learning as a key pedagogical instrument in the Faculty of Education of the Great Zimbabwe University. It obtained information from a survey using an open-ended questionnaire to gather qualitative data from a purposive sample of 20 lecturers. The research is part of a cyclic process of data gathering in which emerging themes initiate further data gathering cycles. Some of the preliminary findings of this study are that there is firm conviction and willingness at Great Zimbabwe University to use e-learning as a key pedagogical instrument. There are flashes of brilliance in E-learning form the tutors in the sample. However, the enthusiastic tutors need to be supported with resources and matching pedagogical skills. The study recommends that the university should arrange visit to some good practice institutions so that tutors can work at same wave lengths with their counterparts in the global village.**

BACKGROUND

New technologies are beginning to shape and direct proceedings in education. Many institutions are gearing up for this new and exciting development so that they are not left behind. The advent of new technologies in education has seen a change in how student and staff access and deliver information. According to Chiome (2013), the BBC reported in March 2005 that the e-learning movement in Europe was now gaining momentum with a "growing demand for online courses". The BBC then conducted a survey of 150 universities. The results of that survey highlighted that they now "saw e-learning as 'mission critical'" and showed an emerging trend, among nearly two thirds of those institutions, to "collaborate with other institutions– both nationally and internationally". For the respondents in that study, their mission critical for the trajectories that attain and sustain quality in e-learning is that:

E-learning should not be taken as a supplementary mode of delivery but as the key pedagogical instrument **(Chiome, 2013, p. 13).**

The fact that the world over, E-learning is now being employed as a key pedagogical instrument means to say in Zimbabwe, a country that is currently the most literate in Africa, lecturers must be sharing this same view and are also taking decisive steps to make E-leaning a reality in the universities they reach. There are some universities worldwide that have made some strides in the right direction. For instance, The University of Western Sydney. The Teaching Development Unit at UWS developed a new e-learning quality framework aimed at implementing this objective across the university (Chiome, 2013).

Great Zimbabwe University is by tradition a campus based institution. This may imply that E-learning is a peripheral activity for both the lecturers and students who are campus based. This is merely the thinking but the trend is changing the world over. For instance, Jara and Mellar (2009) are of the opinion that traditional campus-based universities are increasingly using technologies to support the delivery of their courses. This use of modern technologies to deliver education has resulted in a range of models of technology enhanced provision. This has implications to academics. This is because there is need to accept the fact that how e-learning courses are being delivered should be increasingly becoming an issue of concern for those with a mandate to impart knowledge to studenst in universities. Spotts (1999) appears to support this argument by identifying five significant e-learning variables. These significant e-learning variables are the learner, faculty, technology, environment, and perceived value. Thus, this study has decided to look at one of these significant variables-lecturers teaching at Great Zimbabwe University

Through the use of the many technologies at our disposal, it may be a fact that all academics have embraced E-learning in one way or another. However, still questions arise as to the quality of that E-learning that is being offered. Parker (2008) appears to share the same concern by arguing that as universities increase their e-learning provision, governments, QA agencies and other professional bodies are becoming increasingly interested in identifying the appropriate ways to assure the quality of this provision. Robinson (2004), brings another interesting dimension to the argument on quality of E-learning when it is used as a key pedagogical instrument. According to Robinson (2004), in e-learning courses, the processes of design, teaching, assessment and award are often undertaken by different teams. He even posits that in some cases, design, teaching, assessment and award may be outsourced by the institution whose staff is not ready to deliver. This then results in a disaggregated structure. Robinson (2004), then points out that this partitioning entails the risk of a lack of ownership, and a shifting of responsibilities between parties which may affect the quality

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of the course. It has to be seen what the situation is in the Great Zimbabwe University a Campus based university by tradition.

Universities cannot be left behind when other educational institutions like schools are making efforts to embrace E-learning. According to Armstrong et. al. (2004) E-learning is now a key priority for education and training policy in the UK. Armstrong and associates even opined that it is considered that e-learning has the potential to revolutionise teaching and learning. This revolution is not stopping since new technologies can transform the way institutions deliver services. Many institutions are doing this through developing their capital infrastructure, providing quality interactive content, and supporting teacher training and assessment (Skills Strategy White Paper, cited in Armstrong et al. (2004). Armstrong and his associates then observed that many schools and colleges have embedded e-learning into the curriculum, and demonstrate high levels of effective and appropriate ICT use to support teaching and learning across a wide range of subject areas (Armstrong et al. 2004). It will not be surprising that there may be other institutions which because of circumstances are only beginning their e-learning journeys. This journey is a long one and in this instance it has to put E-learning at the forefront of teaching and learning. This will make E-learning a key pedagogical instrument and the institutions involved can, in principle, benefit from gaining an understanding of the strategic management processes which more enabled institutions have established.

Some campus-based institutions meet challenges in using E-learning as a key pedagogical instrument. One of these documented challenges is the limited access by staff to students. In e-learning courses, whether fully online or blended, the opportunities to directly interact with students become more limited and tutors increasingly have to depend on the students' willingness to login and respond in order to establish communication with them (Walmsley, 2004). Some students are reluctant to login and communicate with their tutors. This may hinder any plans to make E-learning a key pedagogical instrument. It has to be seen what challenges staff in this institution encounter. This prompted this study.

Some of the advantages of E-learning that were mentioned by Broadbent cited in Wang (2003) are that e-learning fosters interaction, stimulates understanding, accommodates different learning styles, fosters self-paced learning, reduces travel time and associated costs, develops knowledge of the internet and encourages students to take responsibility among others. This is against the disadvantages of the cost of equipment outlay and the knowledge gaps in students that can derail these advantages.

As the e-learning system promises a new and unique way of delivering education, it is pertinent that lecturers' views are sought on this critical subject. It is against this background that this research was undertaken.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this research was to examine lecturers' views on the strategic role of E-learning as a key pedagogical instrument in the Faculty of Education of the Great Zimbabwe University.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The question that directed this research was:

What are your views on the strategic role of e-learning as a key pedagogical instrument in your area of specialisation?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the interpretive paradigm (May, 2011). This means to say this study was guided by an interpretivist philosophy. In such a situation, we, as researchers, were guided by the belief that social reality is socially constructed (May, 2011). It means to say, in the context of this research the intention was to understand what meanings people give to reality. To understand what meaning lecturers derive from e-learning as it is used as a key pedagogical instrument. This view is made explicitly by Lidsay et al (cited in May 2011: 101), where they point out that "the researcher seeks an in –depth understanding of the experiences of the participants". The participants in this study were lecturers who had experienced use of e-learning as a key pedagogical instrument or lack of it. Multiplicity of meanings cannot be ruled out in this study since Yin (2011) argued that from the perspective of a study's participants, such an objective cannot ignore the fact that the participants' meanings, if studied and reported by a researcher, also unavoidably subsume a second set of meanings of the same events—those of the researcher. According to May (2011), Interpretativism is a research paradigm that refers to approaches emphasising the meaningful nature of people's participation in social and cultural life. An open-ended questionnaire was used to gather qualitative data from a purposive sample of 20 lecturers.

RESULTS

Firm conviction

In this study, there appears to be ability and willingness to ensure resource committal for the ongoing development of e-learning. Faculty appeared to be willing and ready to give e-learning a go. They appeared highly enthusiastic. Some supporting statements include:

At ECD level, the curriculum has included use of technology. Technological aspects are taught at this level. As a result, E-learning is a key pedagogical instrument, children have to be computer literate from an early age. Thus, we undoubtedly make use of E-learning in our pedagogical practices.

As tutors we e-mail assignments, notices and reading materials to our students on a regular basis.

The results take place from a firm and undoubted lecturer commitment to participation in the adoption of e-learning. In the university under study, there appears to be a firm conviction that it is essential to increase the use of e-learning technologies as key pedagogical instruments. If this key ingredient in e-learning is on the side of its total implementation, then half the battle will have been won. Staff are critical as is the environment and the resources being used. This is well articulated by Laurillard (2006) who made an observation that:

e-Learning could be a highly disruptive technology for education—if we allow it to be...if there is to be innovation and change in university teaching—as the new technology requires, as the knowledge economy requires, and as students demand—someone has to take responsibility for it. Who should that be, other than the university academic community? (Laurillard, 2006, p. 5)

These same sentiments were supported by Ally cited in Esterhuizen Blignaut and Ellis (2013) who opined that ICT can be a vehicle to personalise learning. This is because he saw that ICT provide access to information, provide flexibility regarding time, place, and pace of learning, and enable collaboration and continued study even while working full time (Ally cited in Esterhuizen Blignaut and Ellis, 2013). On the same issue, Voogt and Knezek (2008) have shown that faculty's attitudes towards ICT, their ICT competencies, and their access to ICT tools affect their use of technology.

Flashes of brilliance in ICT

There are flashes of brilliance in ICT that were uncovered in this study. For instance, some lectures mentioned that:

I use E-learning in teaching current affairs in Agriculture. It offers me diverse sources of literature at the click of a button.
I make reading materials readily available online and my students appreciates this.
A laymen also uses aspects of E-learning. I can give an example of the use of automated teller machines.
Tutors and students have been accessing music E-books all this long.

All the lecturers observed had Smartphones that they were using to search for information anywhere anytime. All the offices visited had either computers or laptops that were being used by the lecturers. The ability, willingness and starting point at least appears to be there.

Appropriate pedagogical skills

The issue of appropriate pedagogical skills came out in this study. Some supporting statements to that effect include:

In a global village, we must be as skilled as our colleagues in other parts of the world.

For us to be able to use it as a key pedagogical instrument, we need to acquire 21st century skills. In technology, we must be moving with the times and this includes skills that are current.

The argument was that staff need to have appropriate pedagogical skills for them to apply e-learning as a key pedagogical instrument. According to Voogt & Knezek (2008) utilizing the potential of IT in educational practice often implies that the role of the teacher has to change. These researchers went on to point out that Faculty not only has to learn IT basic knowledge and skills, but more importantly, has to learn appropriate pedagogical skills to be able to integrate IT in a sound way into educational practice. This issue was also prominent in this study. Wilson (2003) is of the view that some of the reasons for using technology in teaching and learning are that it could improve student learning, benefit students in their research and communication, foster independent learning, provide access to worldwide resources, and improve career choices.

Visits to some good practice institutions

One of the recommendations from respondents in this study has to do with enabling the staff and even students to visit some good practice institutions. Some of the statements mentioned include:

E-learning enhances dissemination of information in an efficient and effective manner. However, in a global village, there is need for us to be at par with colleagues in other parts of the world. A visit to a good practice institution will greatly help us.

In such a case, those who pay a visit, will learn good practices and then come back to share the knowledge they have acquired with their other colleagues. According to Armstrong, et al. (2004), a visit aimed at identifying good practice with regard to embedded e-learning, assessing examples of good management practice, gaining feedback from pupils and teachers on e-learning, and examining the sustainability of embedded e-learning is of paramount importance to those whose systems are not yet strong enough to withstand the prevailing e-learning pressure. They even point out that in such a case, interviews will be held with the principal, key ICT personnel and financial staff, and group discussions held with pupils and staff. What this means is that a visit to some good practice institution can enable institutions to make remarkable progress in a short space of time when "teachers and other staff are fully bought into the overall vision for learning and the associated strategies for the use of ICT" (Armstrong, et al. 2004, p. 7).

The work environment

The issue of environment came out in this study. Some statements related to the working environment include:

For us to be at par with the rest of the world, the university has to be current and work hard to acquire state of the art equipment and go on to install these for use by both students and tutors. This environment for now is not as conducive as we had wanted it to be.

The work environment for lecturers has to be conducive to the application of ICT in their studies. The South African Department of Education cited in Esterhuizen, Blignaut and Ellis (2013) noted that many of its teachers have grown up in an environment that had less electronic technology available. They saw this as a challenge and observed that such teachers find the adaptation to working with ICT more difficult than their learners. The South African Department of Education went on to recommend that a programme that urgently addresses the competencies of teachers to use ICT for their personal work, in their classrooms, should be developed. They also saw this as eventually requiring extensive staff development and support from the government to make this noble cause a reality. Thus, they saw, in their wisdom that ICT will be central to the pre-service training of recruits and the on-going professional development of practising teachers (South African Department of Education cited in Esterhuizen, Blignaut and Ellis (2013). The same can also be said about the very people who train the teachers.

Systems and tools

This study uncovered that systems and tools should be put in place to enable lecturers to use e-learning as a key

pedagogical instrument. Some of the following statements were made:

There is need to have a manual that can be used by lecturers in Religious Studies.
Face to face teaching can be done on a different platform form what we used to do. This platform is even cheaper.
E-learning requires gadgets like computers, internet hardware. These are expensive to acquire, set up and maintain.
The students' laptop or computer becomes the library.
E-learning is a very key pedagogical tool which needs to be supported with matching resources.

The systems will enable lecturers to communicate frequently with their students and their peers. According to Esterhuizen, Blignaut and Ellis (2013) a learning-by-design approach requires faculty to navigate the complex interface between tools, authentic learning tasks, students, and learning contexts.

E-learning roadmap

The respondents in this study opined for E-learning road map that the university should follow to enable all staff members to use e-learning as a key pedagogical instrument. Some supporting statements include:

There are a number of advantages of e-learning when compared to traditional face-to-face delivery. In this age of technology, we need to have a clear road map. It will mean our students will have more time to do their research as travel time will be greatly reduced. Students and lectures will only be separated by a chart or e-mail.

In that roadmap, staff development was seen as important and indispensable considering that Esterhuizen, Blignaut and Ellis (2013) noted in their study that Faculty unaccustomed to using technology in their teaching and learning—because they did not grow up with the technology, or have not personally tried out the technology—cannot draw from their lived experiences, or from their recent introduction to the technology. They then pointed out that Faculty have to have first-hand experience of the learning technologies to effectively use them during teaching and learning. They also recommended in their study that staff development is critical by declaring that Faculty professional development is essential to introduce them to new technologies, ensure smooth adoption, and provide experience with the technology.

The words of Esterhuizen, Blignaut and Ellis (2013, p. 6) on staff development of faculty in the university they studied appears to be appropriate here. They reasoned that:

faculty professional development trainer should assist in identifying and defining training problems, obtaining commitment in practice from faculty, simulating positive experiences of ODL students in TEL, designing pedagogically sound course units, identifying learning problem scenarios with faculty members; designing pedagogical objectives that encourage students to make autonomous decisions while engaging with complex context, creating real-world learning tasks for students, and encouraging faculty to take responsibility of their own professional development (Esterhuizen, Blignaut and Ellis, 2013, p. 6).

CONCLUSIONS

This research reached a conclusion that face-to-face lecture is still viewed as the most efficient and dominant medium of instruction in the institution under study. This is happening at a time when communications technology that supports sustained interaction is having a significant impact in this university which has exhibited flashes of brilliance in the use of E-learning as a key pedagogical instrument. Lecturers that employ traditional teaching and learning styles appeared to view e-learning technology as more appropriate for them and their students. In such a case, they feel more positive about using e-learning as a key pedagogical tool like those who believe in student-centered approaches.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study made the following recommendations:

Enthusiastic lecturers at Great Zimbabwe University who are moving with the times need to be supported to capture and maintain their enthusiasm

A training programme should be out in place so that they can harness they collective wisdom for the benefit of the university

More resources should be put in place so that both lecturers and students feel they are part of the global village.

Funds allowing, a visit to a 'good e-learning practices institution' should be prioritised in the future.

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