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Towards Enhancing Open Distance Learning Students' Roles and Responsibilities: An African Epistemological Perspective

Abstract

South Africa requires an educated population to sustain her economic development. Higher education institutions are under pressure to produce graduates with skills and competencies to fulfil such an aspiration. Distance education is an essential avenue through which more South Africans can have the much-needed education without necessarily displacing themselves. Distance education is facilitated and regulated by the White Paper on e-Education which is a generic policy document to serve the needs of the system-wide use of ICT integration at all levels of education. It falls short of conceptualising the implications of ICT in distance education particularly the North-West University's (NWU) open distance learning (ODL) multi-mode of education content delivery. The conceptualisation shortfall facilitates a Western-oriented understanding of knowledge while ODL students' traditional understanding of their roles and responsibilities is ignored. The concepts of roles and responsibilities are critically important for the effective functioning of ODL, and they are essential to the attainment of students' education aspirations. At the NWU, approximately seventy per cent of ODL students are Africans whose worldviews do not harmonise with the vision of universities. The research question which underpinned this study was *What are the experiences of the roles and responsibilities of open distance students at a higher education institution?* This study followed an interpretivist research paradigm, which would draw on a qualitative research approach. A systematic literature review was utilised and subsequently the views of ODL students were explored. Purposive sampling was employed to select ODL students as research participants for focus-group interviews. The collected data were analysed using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (a CAQDAS), ATLAS tI. Due attention was given to ethical considerations throughout the study. The findings revealed that ODL students have several ways in which they understand their roles and responsibilities which were shaped by their African worldview, Africanisation. The findings that emerged from the analyses of roles and responsibilities were task orientation; time management; personal growth; social roles; financial responsibilities; personal responsibilities; family responsibilities; and social responsibilities.

Keywords: open distance education, distance learning, roles of distance learning students, responsibilities of distance learning students, Africanisation

Introduction

In our capacity as university lecturers for open distance learning (ODL) students, we often observe how ODL students grapple with what is expected of them as adult distance students. Some difficulties which were observed were that students submit their assignments long after the due date has passed and then make excuses. Some students submit work that is not their own and then they indicate that they are studying

“cooperatively”. After inestimable face-to-face messages and telephone conversations with students, it became apparent that students are not aware of, or do not understand, their roles and responsibilities as ODL students. This could contribute to why many students experience difficulties in their professional development through ODL. It is for this reason that the purpose of this paper is to investigate the view of ODL students concerning their roles and responsibilities framed within the African epistemological and ontological perspective.

In this section, aspects of African epistemology and ontology have also been unpacked in the terms of Ubuntu, culture, tradition, religion, and human being. As the large majority of the NWU ODL students originate from African cultures, the world view of this paper and the rest of the study mainly relates to African value systems. This value system is different from the colonized Western epistemological view that often underpins higher education methodologies in South Africa.

Firstly, the African epistemological and ontological lenses through which we understood the research problems were elucidated, systematically reviewed literature, focused, and interpreted the data to arrive at the findings. This section is followed by the statement of the problem and motivation for the research. A brief review of the literature is explained next. In the review, brief engagement with distance education, ICT in ODL, ODL students’ characteristics, roles, and responsibilities and decolonising the African university was done. The research question is presented in this section. The next section in the paper outlines the aim of the study. The qualitative case study as well as the research design and methodology of this research was presented. The sampling criteria for participation are also reported, together with the ethical considerations. The collection and data analysis of the qualitative data are discussed, and the trustworthiness and credibility of the qualitative findings are considered. The paper ends with an outline that explains how the rest of the research report is structured.

African epistemological and ontological lens for this study

Gray (2001, p. 3) defines the term Afrocentric as

an idea and a perspective which holds that African people can and should see, study, interpret and interact with people, life, and reality from the vantage point of African people rather than from the vantage point of European people, or Asians, or other non-African people, or from the vantage point of African people who are alienated from Africanness.

An Afrocentric worldview is “used to describe the cultural values of people of African origin and African descent throughout the World” (Mekada, 1999, p. 53). In recent times, the importance of the concept of Ubuntu has increasingly become more prominent in South Africa. The underpinning notions of Ubuntu, “rooted in African traditional society and philosophy and implying humanness or the quality of being human”, are now questioned by those who seem to experience the meaning of Ubuntu owing to the unequal nature of the South African society under the democratic dispensation. Ubuntu also “espouses the ideal of interconnectedness among people”; much of it is still very much in practice within African societies. This view is supported by the African belief that “one should always live for the other”.

Ubuntu

Tutu (2011, p. 24) states that “Ubuntu teaches us that our worth is intrinsic to who we are. Ubuntu reminds us that we belong to one family: God’s family, the human family”. Ubuntu is associated with *umntu* meaning a human being and is “a deeply rooted value system in the African society”. A human being (*umntu*) comprises the following elements: body, heart, breath, soul, energy, language, intellect, and humanness. These elements together make up a human being. The nature of Ubuntu is the most valuable attribute of true human existence. Le Roux (2000, p. 43) claims that

a person possessing Ubuntu will have characteristics such as being caring, humble, thoughtful, considerate, understanding, wise, generous, hospitable, socially mature, socially sensitive, virtuous and blessed.

This would mean that Ubuntu/Botho is considered to constitute aspects of a social ethic that in African society, serves as a unifier of that society. This is an important social issue because African societies tend to place a high value on social behaviours which are associated with the worth of an individual – unlike the West, which is often characterized by humanism (Teffo, 1998). The dependency of the human self on the other within a society is conveyed by the saying “Motho ke motho ka batho ba bang” (Sotho) or “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” (Nguni) which means “I am because we are” (Teffo, 1998, pp. 3-5).

Mbigi and Maree (2005) define Ubuntu as a metaphor that places emphasis on the social connotation of group solidarity; on the endurance of African communities which comes as a result of poverty and dispossession, hence survival is achieved through brotherly group care. Unlike that of individual self-reliance common in western societies. They further explain that this praxis of concerted solidarity is not new and not peculiar to Africa. Ironically, Ubuntu is the embodiment of an idea, often flawed in its interpretation and the practice thereof. Ubuntu acts as a social barrier, causing people to become less selfish and egocentric.

The ideal person according to the African worldview... is one who has the virtues of sharing and compassion. The individual has a social commitment to share with others what s/he has. The ideal person will be judged in terms of his relationship with others, for example, his record in terms of kindness and good character, generosity, hard work, discipline, honour and respect, and living in harmony. (Teffo, 1996, p. 103)

The perception of Ubuntu along with that of its counterpart, communalism, when drawn from an African philosophy of education, contributes significantly to one’s understanding of knowledge within an African educational discourse (Venter, 2004).

The philosophy of Ubuntu helps with human relationships, and boosts human value, trust, and dignity. This again leads to social harmony and cohesion starting with the family and cultural community, circling out to the universal community. (Le Roux, 2000)

Human beings are social beings created to live within a subtle network of mutual dependency. The ideal of *Botho* or *Ubuntu*, as implemented within an educational setting, can only work when teacher advancement forms part of the community. For the implementation to be considered a success, this requires that the philosophy of Ubuntu should be at the centre of teacher advancement in Africa. The mainstream narrative of the current forms of teacher development, mainly western, must be dismantled. Ubuntu-oriented teacher education should acknowledge the many identities throughout the people that make up any open and distance learning institution and who concur in

creating substantial learning opportunities for learners of African descent (Van Niekerk, 2004).

Distance education

Education is mostly considered to mean the undertaking or proceeding of acquiring general knowledge which may or may not directly impact society. Education also has the potential to develop ones' potential of reasoning and rational judgement through a process of preparing oneself or others intellectually for a mature life. Van Heerden (1997, p. 18) indicates that "Africanisation of education is often employed concerning educational change, and in the sense of bringing African culture into formal schooling".

This paper is centred on distance education. There is no single unifying definition of distance education (DE). DE has been conceptualized in many ways, but in easy terms, it alludes to a predetermined and systematic educational provision where there is a significant distance between the instructors' institution and that of the student (Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2009). Teaching and learning in DE is a planned process that normally occurs in a different locale from teaching, but it requires a special course design and instructional techniques, supported by special organizational and administrative arrangements, in which various types of ICT are used for communication (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). The most general features of DE include the use of mixed media (paper-based and electronic) for "teaching and learning, correspondence, independent learning, and the possibility of face-to-face meetings with tutors" (Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2009, p. 12).

ODL is an advantageous mode of education delivery because "it makes learning more accessible" to a wider range of students, especially those in remote areas, and provides them with "the opportunity to control their learning schedules" (Ko & Rossen, 2001, p. 5). The openness of ODL presents an ideological position that affects access and availability of education to distant communities and supports the assumptions about the production of knowledge and its facilitation. In South Africa, DE and ODL are predominantly being used to deliver teacher professional development (TPD) for in-service practicing teachers across different geographic and socio-economic barriers. In South Africa, consideration of the implementations of open and distance learning and teacher development should be reflected upon in terms of the history and context. This implies that a rethink is needed when teacher development programmes are being designed in open and distance learning.

Information and communication technologies in open distance learning

Various forms of ICTs are used in ODL for pedagogical support, e.g. computer hardware and software, the Internet, calculators, multi-media, broadcasting technology (radio and television), personal digital assistants (PDAs), course management tools, computer-mediated communication (CMC), electronic networks, wireless networks, data projectors, interactive whiteboards, computer conferencing, etc. (Shafiul Alam, 2010, p. 98).

The general direction of DE/ODL depends on a country's technology infrastructure, pedagogy, and educational objectives. The attainment and assimilation of knowledge are significantly facilitated by ICT, which offers developing countries, such as South Africa, unprecedented opportunities to enhance education. To make

gains with this opportunity, improved policy formulation and execution is required that would seek to broaden the range of opportunities for business and the poor (Mikre, 2011).

Although ICT plays a substantial role in fostering an equalization plan for many developing countries, this has not succeeded in addressing some of the fundamental inequalities also created by the realities of digitalization. The widening gap between those who have access to the digital world and those who still struggle to have access, seems to have made a huge difference in the digitalization of ODL (Mikre, 2011). The use of ICT in ODL has the possibility of reducing the digital divide amongst students and has the potential to reach rural and remote areas for skills development and proper education, providing the opportunity for the massification of education while students are exposed to world class standards and trends (Kruger, 2010).

ODL students' characteristics, roles, and responsibilities

General characteristics of successful open distance learning (ODL) students include students who: (i) voluntarily seek further education or professional development; (ii) are on average, older than on-campus students; (iii) are highly self-motivated; (iv) self-disciplined students; (v) are willing to initiate telephonic conversations to instructors for assistance; (vi) possess a serious attitude towards coursework; (vii) take responsibility for their independent studies; and (viii) possess a previous qualification (Baloyi, 2014).

Vital to successful ODL learning is the students' ability to balance responsibilities, both within communities of learning and beyond. Students should become "self-directed learners", which requires them to be highly "self-regulated", to be responsible for organizing their learning, and to be reflective (Du Plessis, 2011).

Research question

The research question which underpinned this study was *What are the experiences of the roles and responsibilities of open distance students at a higher education institution?*

Research design

The study followed an interpretivist research paradigm, which would draw on a qualitative research approach. To explore the experiences of the ODL students' roles and responsibilities, a systematic literature review was employed to qualitatively scrutinise the appropriate literature and subsequently explore the ODL students' views. Purposive sampling to select ODL students as research participants for focus-group interviews was utilized. Although registered as distance students at the North-West University, these students had the proximity advantage of attending contact sessions at the Potchefstroom campus, where Interactive White Board sessions were being offered to all distance students. The collected data were coded, sorted, and summarised as themes, using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (a CAQDAS), ATLAS tiTM. The analyses comprised an integrated dataset of voices from systematically selected authors and ODL students to address the research question. Due attention was given to ethical considerations throughout the study.

Findings

The findings revealed that ODL students have several ways in which they understand their roles and responsibilities which were shaped by their African worldview, Africanisation. The findings that emerged from the analyses of roles and responsibilities were task orientation; time management; personal growth; social roles; financial responsibilities; personal responsibilities; family responsibilities and social responsibilities. This is because existing literature on these two entities combined them as a single. The analyses indicated that the students were not able to clearly distinguish the entities of roles and responsibilities and indicated a superficial understanding of how students understood aspects of task orientation, time management, and social roles. Students who are task oriented demonstrated a vivid understanding of their roles, and this eventually contributes to their academic success. The students who understood their roles superficially, tend to confuse their social roles with time management for academic activities. For this reason, much of their time available for study is redirected toward attending to family responsibilities. This created a disjointed understanding on the part of students in terms of their expectations as ODL students. ODL students are expected to study at their own time, pace, and space. The inability of students to “juggle their time” to oblige their roles and responsibilities, contributes to the ineffective fulfilment of their goals. Most ODL students are full time employees, parents, community representatives, etc. These responsibilities receive more attention than their commitment to their roles as students, especially regarding their time management.

Conclusion

It was evident that ODL students perceived their personal growth differently. ODL students are intensely aware of their financial responsibilities, and they often experience difficulties in fulfilling them. These students experience financial constraints due to their family and personal obligations. Although the language of teaching and learning is predominantly English, it was evident from the findings that when students understood their responsibility for personal development, they were also able to overcome barriers associated with the use of English as a language of teaching and learning. It emerged from the findings that ODL students were unable to attend classes organised on Friday afternoons and Saturdays due to their family and employment responsibilities. Students often regard family responsibilities as more important due to their African context, and this might affect their studies. From the lens of an African perspective, the study identified eight matching conclusions, contributions, and questions to be addressed during future research.

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