Probing the Validity of Misconceptions about Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria: A Three- Phase Empirical Approach

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Abstract

This study identifies a set of misconceptions about distance education among university lecturers at University of Ibadan, Nigeria. It employed a Three-Phased Empirical Approach. In Phase I, a list of misconceptions arising from a detailed interview with nine lecturers was developed. In Phase II, these misconceptions were reviewed, elaborated and categorized into semi-structured interviews. From which a list of 11 misconceptions was developed. In Phase III, these misconceptions were verified quantitatively with 60 purposively selected lecturers participating in the distance learning programme of the University. Data were collected through 'ODL facilitators' common misconceptions scale' with a reliability coefficient of 0.87. Data collected were 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 training programmes should be organised for distance learning tutors and research grants as well as fellowships should be instituted for university teachers who are interested in conducting researches on open and distance learning.

Keywords: Validity, Misconceptions, Distance education, University Lecturers, and Three-Phased Empirical Approach

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. In America, the Chautauqua Movement, started in 1874, commenced the first integrated core programme in adult education throughout America in 1878 which led to correspondence courses being started in 1879. Even prior to that, an organization called The Society to Encourage Studies at Home was founded in 1873 and in 1883. A Correspondence University was also founded in America (Knowles, 1977).

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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, (e-mail), 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 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."

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 from the negative, unpleasant, and morale- killing comments and statements which university teachers were alleged to have made against distance learners. There is no doubt that distance education has not been accepted, by some, 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 those who should have known- the university teachers- with a view of correcting the misconceptions. This study was, in essence, carried-out with the aim of achieving this purpose.

Literature review

Distance education and open learning has continued to attract international attention and recognition by educational policy makers and practitioners across the world. According to Dias, (1997) "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" (P.1) There is no doubt that distance education and open learning has established itself as an integral part of the educational delivery systems in Nigeria with the establishment of many integrated and a few dedicated distance education institutions in

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Nigeria. Examples of integrated distance learning institutions include: the Distance Learning Institute of University of Lagos, the Distance Learning Centre of University of Ibadan, the Continuing and Distance Learning Programme of Obafemi Awolowo University, the Distance Learning Centre of Ahmadu Bello University while that of the dedicated Distance Learning institutions are: the National Teachers Institute and National Open University of Nigeria (Afolabi-Ojo, 1986). The resuscitation of the suspended National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in 2002, made open learning not only a Siamese twin of distance education practice in the country but also an acceptable component of the educational delivery (Adesola, 2002). 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 the government (Federal Republic of Nigeria) when it 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 Nigerian experts as teachers regardless of their locations or places of work (p.45).

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.

Despite these multi-dimensional roles of open and distance learning, it has, for most of its history, had to contend with suspicion among educational authorities about low quality standards or even unethical practices. Open and Distance learning system is often criticized for placing too much emphasis on widening access than assuring quality. The importance of quality assurance is now universally perceived as a key issue that needs to be addressed by open and distance learning institutions worldwide.

Beyond Practice: The Phenomenon Of Distance Education in Nigeria.

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Distance education was introduced into Nigeria by the colonialists as part of the package of western education and colonial enterprise because of the absence of a university in Nigeria then. It was immediately embraced by Nigerians, especially from the southern part of the country, as an opportunity to acquire university education without leaving the shores of the country. Thus, some of the early educated elites in Nigeria: Eyo ITA, H.O. Davies, E.P. Ajayi, Alvan Ikoku, J.S.Ogunlesi, among others, got their university degrees without ever visiting the university they got their degrees from (Omolewa, 1982). In essence, distance education helped in the removal of many of the traditional barriers to working adults' participation in higher educational programme (Ojokheta, 2000).

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 Nigeria. Ojerinde, (2008) reported that less than 20% of those who apply for admission into the universities, through the Joint Admission Matriculation Board (JAMB), are never offered admission. Invariably, majority of the left-over's seek university education through the distance education mode. This is why Calvert, (1986) contented that distance education has helped to extend market for education to clientele who have not been previously served. For example, the University of lbadan Distance Learning Centre currently has over 25,000 student population (University of Ibadan, DLC Handbook, 2006). Thus, distance education is playing complementary role to the conventional university in the provision of educational opportunity to those who would have been denied.

Beyond Definition: The Hallmarks of Distance Education

The term distance education or distance learning has been applied interchangeably by many different researchers to a great variety of programmes, providers, audiences, and media. Its hallmarks are the separation of the teacher and the learners in space and/or time (Perraton,1993, 2000), the volitional control of learning by the student rather than the distant instructor (Jonassen,1991), the non-contiguous communication between student and the teacher, mediated by print or some form of technology (keegan,1986; Garrison and Baynton,1987, Garrison and Shale,1987), the enhancement of independent learning materials through the use of interactive communication technologies and teacher mediation (Porter,1994), the high degree of accessibility and the quality of interactive learning and teaching process(Peters,1994, 1998).

Teaching and Learning: The Space-time Instantiation and Space- time Distanciation/Space-time Compression.

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

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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 in1994. 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 university 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.

The objectives of the study are, to;
- Find-out the common misconceptions that conventional university 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 university teachers to ODL programmes as a result of these misconceptions
- Suggest possible ways through which university 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

For the purpose of statistical analysis, the objectives were turned to research questions; which were:
- What are the common misconceptions that university 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 university teachers to ODL programmes as a result of these misconceptions?
- What are the possible ways through which university teachers can be made to have a positive mindset towards open and distance learning?

Methodology

The study adopted a three-phased empirical approach. Phase I, conducted to develop an initial list of misconceptions, comprised a detailed interview with nine lecturers. In Phase II, these misconceptions were reviewed, elaborated and categorized by two distance education experts by means of semi-structured interviews. A list of 11 misconceptions was then developed and in Phase III, these misconceptions were verified quantitatively with 60 purposively selected lecturers from participating departments in the distance learning programme of the university. Data were collected through 'ODL facilitators' common misconceptions scale' with a reliability coefficient of 0.87. Data collected were analysed using simple percentages, content analysis, and multiple regression analysis.

Results and Discussion of Findings

The results obtained through the research questions are presented below:

Research Question One

Research question one sought to find out the common misconceptions about open and distance learning among the respondents. 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.

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Variables	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%
It is opportunistic form of learning for average or less intelligent students.	60	100%
In-depth knowledge acquisition is unachievable through ODL.	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 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

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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 university teachers to ODL programmes as a result of these misconceptions. Findings got from formal discussions with the respondents show that:

1. All 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 Nigerian experts as teachers regardless of their locations or places of work.

Similarly, in order to ascertain the common manifestations exhibited by university teachers to ODL programmes at University of Ibadan, the researcher, assisted by some postgraduate students, had a formal discussion with some of the distance learning students of the University. The result obtained, from the discussion, revealed that the conventionally trained distance learning tutors of the University most times:

- perceive distance learning students as second class students;
- pay little or no attention to their learning problems during face-to-face contact period;
- disregard their viewpoints as inferior especially in classes;

- use derogatory, demoralizing, and de-motivating words against this form of learning and against distance learning students especially in classes;
- pay little or no regard to class attendance during face-to-face contact period;
- pay little or no regard to the application of the principles of adult learning (such as: the age, the experience, the self-respect and dignity, and the social responsibility factors) when dealing or interacting with the distance learning students;
- do not show sufficient commitment to the curriculum content of distance learning course materials;
- delay excessively the marking and assessment of distance learning examination scripts;
- massively police and extensively invigilate distance learning students during examination because they are often perceived as greater cheaters when they are compared with the regular students.

Research Question Four

Research question four was conceived to find out the possible ways through which university 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 Nigeria need to institute some strategic plans for enhancing the acceptability of ODL as a standard and alternative educational delivery especially among University 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 Nigerians such as: Eyo ITA, H.O. Davies, E.P. Ajayi, Alvan Ikoku, J.S.Ogunlesi, Obafemi Awolowo, Gani Fawehinmi among others got their degrees through ODL, then known as correspondence education. These Nigerians were highly recognized and revered individuals who, at one time or the other, occupied positions of higher authority and played distinguishable roles in the political, economic, and social history of the country. It is well known that these notable citizens of the country were 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 University of Ibadan (even though not yet open in the truest sense of it) are subjected to the same quality assurance mechanisms as that of her 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 the same examinations and evaluated through the same yardsticks or parameters. 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. So also is the issue that ODL is less vigorous when compared with the conventional programmes. 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 as more and more young and adolescent learners, of 18 years and above, continue to embrace ODL in Nigeria. For example, the characteristic features of contemporary beneficiaries of distance learning programmes of University of Ibadan showed that over 80% of the learners are less than 35 years (University of Ibadan, Distance Learning Programme handbook, 2006). This shows that it is a misleading assertion that ODL is adult learners dominated.

The misconceptions about ODL emanated simply because the present set of distance learning tutors of university had their training through the conventional mode. 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 Nigeria need to come up with institutional strategic plans for enhancing the acceptability of ODL among University teachers who, in most cases, serve as the tutors in open and distance education programme. 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 distance learning tutors for proper understanding of this mode of educational delivery.
- This should be followed with a training programme for the tutors where renowned experts in open and distance learning will be invited to talk and train the tutors on the modalities for conducting open and distance learning programme. This should be done periodically.
- University teachers, irrespective of whether they teach in distance learning programme or not, 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.
- University lecturers can equally be sponsored to mega open and distance universities across the world (universities with more than 100,000 student enrolment) to have first-hand comprehensive information, knowledge, and workings of these institutions as regards open and distance learning delivery.

- ▪ Research grants and fellowships can be instituted by open and distance learning institutions for university teachers who are interested in conducting researches on open and distance learning.
- ▪ University lecturers, irrespective of whether they teach in distance learning programme or not, can be appointed to serve in sub-committees (such as: academic planning, student support services, course material writing and development, students record management, quality control, among others) to facilitate effective management and administration of open and distance learning programme in each university.
- ▪ Finally, members of distance learning board of studies in each university should be enlarged to include all lecturers in each faculty irrespective of whether they teach in the distance learning programme or not.

Conclusion

This study has been able to establish how university lecturers 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 university lecturers 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 especially university lecturers, who constitute significant proportion of resources persons employed for instructional dissemination in open and distance learning programme. This is where the recommendations specified above become imperative.

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