The Role of Lecturers and University Administrators in Promoting New E-Learning Initiatives

Lancelord Siphamandla Mncube, Information Science, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa
Luyanda Dube, Information Science, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa
Patrick Ngulube, School of Interdisciplinary Research and Postgraduate Studies, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of lecturers in encouraging and supporting students likely to be predisposed to challenges related to incomprehension, incapacity and isolation embedded in the virtual learning environment. This article used a constructivist lens to gain through interviews an understanding into the intuition, thoughts, ideals, beliefs and inclination of lecturers about the nature and extent of their supportive role in the e-learning environment. The key findings revealed that the role of lecturers in promoting e-learning is varied. The discrepancy seems to be emanating from the lack of clear understanding of the meaning, the depth, the breadth and thrust of e-learning pedagogy at the University of South Africa (UNISA). The UNISA Strategy 2015-2030 introduced incremental changes in the form of Open Distance e-Learning (ODEL), which highlights the infusion of e-learning in the Open Distance Learning (ODL) context. Given its ODEL mandate, and the prescripts of the UNISA Strategy 2015-2030 and as part of the academic project the institution committed to introduce e-learning from 2015. Further, the institutional resolve to adopt a hybrid model that incorporates traditional and electronic teaching modes has caused uncertainty in the teaching space with some lecturers leaning towards e-learning whilst others lean towards traditional methods. The article recommends that UNISA needs to clarify its standpoint by adopting definitions, demarcations, strategies and tools that will enhance the understanding, adoption and usability of e-learning platforms and systems.

KEYWORDS

E-Learning in an Open-Distance Institution, Information Science, Open Distance Learning Institution, Promotion of E-Learning, Role of Lecturers in E-Learning, University of South Africa

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of the higher education sector together with the evolvement of information and communication technologies (ICT’s) has over the years brought about changes in different dimensions and facets of education. The changes were perpetual and multifaceted and include access modes, pedagogical methods and theories, shift in power relations, roles of lecturer and student, modes of

DOI: 10.4018/IJVPLE.2017010101

Copyright © 2017, IGI Global. Copying or distributing in print or electronic forms without written permission of IGI Global is prohibited.
knowledge transmission and expected outcomes (Demetriadis & Pombortsis, 2007). They largely entail a shift from a passive mode and linear to a more flexible, modern, diverse, adaptable learner-centred methods and strategies. This new focus emphasises self-directed methods intended to enhance long-lasting learning based on educational goals and students’ capabilities as opposed to traditional teaching methods relegated the student to the inactive zone. Central to the change is the transformative and constructivist paradigms that assume that the student is an active participant not merely a passive and dependent player with the facilitator/lecturer transitioning from being the source of knowledge to a facilitator and intermediary in the learning process. The shift from lecturer-centred instruction to student-centred teaching entails transformation of power relations and repositioning of the lecturer and student. The new dispensation imposes new opportunities and responsibilities for both educators and learners who have to be independent and learn how to learn whilst the former has to contemplate choosing the best teaching method and offering the appropriate content (Pourghaznein, Sabeghi & Shariatinejad, 2015).

The transformative agenda in the education space have forced universities to critically relook the scholarship of learning and to adopt not only pedagogically informed teaching but also modern teaching and learning technologies embedded in the dynamic nature and opportunities of the information technology era (Lee & Yeap, 2009 in Chitananana, 2014). The new technologies are transformative tools facilitating the move from traditional learning to e-learning platforms. It is through e-learning platforms that universities are able to be globally competitive, to respond to national and international imperatives, to improve the quality of teaching and learning as well as democratise access to education. This is the true for all universities but more so for ODeL institutions who offer a virtual teaching and learning mode, such as the University of South Africa (UNISA).

E-learning is a new paradigm of teaching and learning that can be delivered through a computer-based or mediated medium that can enhance global reach because it allows everyone to learn anything anywhere and at any time throughout their lives (Deeraj & Harbon, 2014; Marimo, Mashingaidze & Nyoni, in Ncube, Dube & Ngulube, 2014). Due to its omnipresence nature e-learning has multiple benefits that are well documented in the literature. They include the ability to bridge the distance, that is collapsing the transactional distance between students and fellow students and lecturers, widening opportunities and access to education beyond geographic spectra, providing flexibility, convenience and autonomy of studying at their own pace to anyone, anytime, anywhere (Johnston, Christensen & Loquist, 2003; Verma, Dubey, & Rizvi, 2016; Medastín, 2016). Further, e-learning provides opportunities for enhanced, broad, flexible and sustained communication, interaction and sharing of information and experiences amongst students and lecturers in relatively short time (Pourghaznein, Sabeghi & Shariatinejad, 2015). The spin offs that students gain from enhanced communication is that students get feedback on time which increases the probability of completing courses just-in-time which in return reduces the cost expended towards studying (De Villiers, 2007; Law & Perryman 2017), and improves completion and throughput rates whilst reducing dropout rates.

E-Learning Caveats and Nuances

E-learning entails a space of perpetual changes and growth that requires a paradigm shift among role players. Given that change in general usually challenges longstanding traditions and customs it is usually prone to resistance and for it to have any chance of being successful it needs to be handled sensitively through change and risk management process, if it is (Deeraj & Harbon, 2014). In view of this, it is important that the introduction of a new innovation or even the upgrading of an existing one, is introduced, appropriately because if not it is likely to be resisted, as people are sometimes attached to established pedagogies and practices (Ncube, Dube & Ngulube, 2014). In particular, there is evidence that some e-learning initiatives have failed because the institution and its constituencies were not ready for the e-learning experience (Deeraj & Harbon, 2014; Karmakar & Wahid, n.d.). Even if people recognise the value of e-learning they can still show some unwillingness to adopt the technology if it is incongruent with traditions, cultures and persuasions (Bates & Poole, 2013). The
Art and Didactics in Virtual Worlds: How Technology Can Activate Social Skills
www.igi-global.com/chapter/art-and-didactics-in-virtual-worlds/182032?camid=4v1a

Classroom Orchestration: Balancing between Personal and Collaborative Learning Processes
www.igi-global.com/article/classroom-orchestration/132856?camid=4v1a