Identifying and Addressing Cultural Barriers to Faculty Adoption and Use of a Learning Management System in a Ghanaian University: A Participatory Action Research Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study adopted a participatory action research (PAR) approach to identify and address the various cultural factors that contribute in hindering faculty adoption and use of a Learning Management System (LMS) for online collaborative learning (OCL) at a private university in Ghana. This followed a realization that an LMS that the university deployed for OCL purposes, and had been available for over five years, remained largely unused by faculty members despite that they have been trained, motivated and appropriately resourced to do so. With a preliminary investigation revealing the possible role of cultural factors, this study drew on some aspects of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory to develop and conceptualize a research framework, and subsequently engaged 10 faculty members in a semester-long action study. Findings show that by collectively identifying the cultural underpinnings, and conscientiously working on them, faculty members can ultimately change their attitudes (as well as those of their other colleagues) significantly, and be better predisposed to using online collaborative tools and resources for OCL.

Keywords: CyberCampus, Ghana, Learning Management System, Online (Distance) Learning, Participatory Action Research, Regent University

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Higher education institutions all over the world are increasingly adopting Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to support and enhance instruction delivery to both in-class and distance learners (Simmons, 2002). One such ubiquitous educational technology is the Learning Management System (LMS), also known as Course Management System (CMS) or Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). These are web-based, user-friendly, software packages that provide integrated sets of tools for course administration, communication, tracking of user activities, and assessment of teaching and learning processes (Ellis, 2009). LMSs also permit faculty to incorporate multimedia elements including audio, video, text, interactivity, and sequencing. These technologies (examples of which include Blackboard, Moodle and Sakai) are therefore considered to be the most appropriate tools for supporting and enhancing teaching and learning activities (West, Waddoups, & Graham, 2007; Yohon, Zimmerman, & Keeler, 2004). LMSs have also been demonstrated to have positive effects on student learning when used effectively (Harvey, 2003; Salpeter, 1998).

Dating from the mid- to late-1990s, LMSs have evolved rapidly and are being used extensively by higher education institutions all over the world as single integrated platforms for instructional activities ranging from augmenting face-to-face courses, through supporting hybrid courses to implementing fully online (distance learning) courses (Arabasz, Pirani, & Fawcett, 2003; Dutton, Cheong, & Park, 2004; Morgan, 2003). The existence of an LMS in most educational institutions is generally evidenced by the presence of links on their respective websites that bear names such as eLearning, eTeaching, eCampus, Blackboard, Moodle, Virtual Campus etc.

With the knowledge that learners benefit more from LMS facilitated learning processes when instructors are actively involved in guiding, supporting and regularly participating in some of the collaborative activities with the learners (Cavanaugh, 2005), institutions that deploy these LMSs place emphasis on training, motivating and resourcing their faculty members to effectively use these resources for collaborative learning (Gautreau, 2011). Research works aimed at identifying the various factors that influence faculty ability and willingness to use LMSs in their instructional activities, particularly online collaborative learning (OCL) are therefore very relevant, and indeed are ongoing, particularly at the institutional level.

Some of these research works have produced findings which reveal that instructors and faculty members generally hold positive views about the potential benefits of LMSs (e.g. Bongalos et al., 2006). However, significant numbers have also been found to be quite reluctant or ill motivated to use the LMSs particularly for collaborative learning (Gautreau, 2011; Morgan, 2003). Another major finding is that, for faculty members who use LMSs, most tend to use only the parts or functions that replace the older techniques for reproducing and distributing course documents (Bongalos, Bulaon, Celedonio, deGuzman, & Ogarte, 2006; Dutton et al., 2004; Jafari, McGee, & Carmean, 2006).

Theories such as Herzberg et al’s Motivation Hygiene Theory (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959), Rogers’ Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Rogers, 1995) and Fullan’s Change Theory (Fullan, 2001) have been used to help identify and explain the factors that influence faculty members’ inclination to use LMSs in their instructional practices, or otherwise. Thus factors such as; rewards and incentives, technical and administrative support, policy, working conditions, teaching load etc. and their potential impacts on faculty LMS uptake, have been explored and appropriate recommendations made (e.g. MacDonald, Yanchar, & Osguthorpe, 2005; Schifter, 2000).

It is however a known fact that each individual’s personal outlooks and viewpoints are “developed [and shaped] in the family in early childhood and reinforced in schools and organizations” (Geert Hofstede, 2001, p. 2).
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