

Effective ODeL Instructional Delivery: Using the Lenses of Tutors

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ABSTRACT

A growing body of research on effective instruction acknowledges the pervasive influence of educational technologies, tutor dispositions and perceived institutional support to classroom practice. Yet, there are limited studies on the perceptions of ODL tutors to these three factors. This study found that ODL tutors in two universities in Botswana considered these factors to play varying roles in shaping their classroom modus operandi, in shaping tutor motivation and classroom creativity and in shaping learner experiences. The study recommends that new ODL learners should take a compulsory introductory module on computer-mediated learning in order to bring learners up to speed on the basic of learning through technology. Furthermore, the study recommends further research on dispositions in order to discern which dispositions are necessary in what contexts. Currently this area of research has received little research attention and there are many areas that are still unknown. In the case of institutional support, there is a need for a more streamlined approach to providing support to tutors in order to address the four areas of critical importance, which are; what support is needed, from whom, for what purpose, and how to measure the impact of such support.

Keywords: disposition, institutional support, technology-mediated teaching, learner performance, ODeL, effective instruction

BACKGROUND

Effective instruction is very important in open and distance learning (ODL) where it has been found to make a difference between success and failure (Baran & Correia, 2014). Against the background of low learner performance and high attrition rate in the field of ODL, instruction can address some of the individual-level challenges that hinder learners' positive experiences of learning activities. A myriad of factors that facilitate as well as those that impede effective instruction have been discussed extensively in the literature (Beck & Ferdig, 2008; Hunt, Davies, Richardson, Hammock, Akins, & Russ, 2014). These include socio-cultural, economic, organisational and student factors, among other things. The standing consensus is that since effective instruction results from different factors, it is imperative to address these factors in order to guarantee effective teaching and learning. Relative to other factors, tutor perceptions about factors that facilitate or hinder effective instruction have received limited research attention, despite mounting research that shows that staff is likely to invest more effort in activities that are aligned with their own perceptions (Falola et al., 2018; Baran & Correia, 2014; Francisco & Celon, 2020). This paper sought to address this gap by exploring the perceptions of tutors about how technology use in teaching, tutor dispositions, and organisational support impacted effective instruction. The study was conducted in two institutions that

provide open and distance learning in Botswana, namely; Botswana Open University and Ba Isago University.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Moore and Kearsley's Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) which was proposed in 1973 formed the theoretical framework for this study. This theory moves the understanding of distance in distance education from a geographical separation of the tutor and the learner to a cognitive factor that defines a knowledge and communication gap/space that exist between the teacher and the learner. This cognitive space is the basis for the interaction of the teacher and the learner in the process of teaching and learning. The aim of the instructional interaction is to reduce this space.

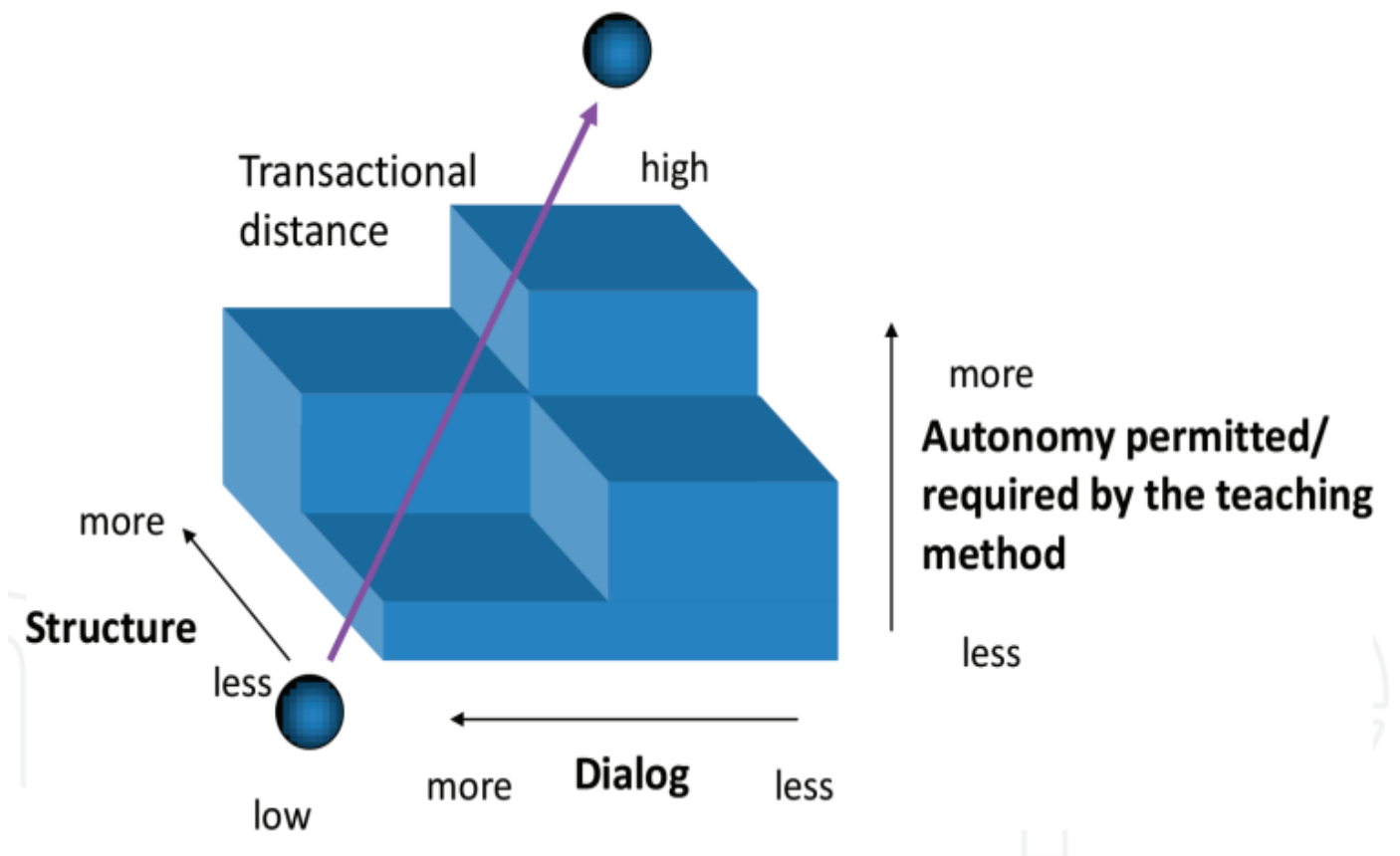


Figure 1: Transactional Distance Theory (Adapted from Chen, 2001)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Technology integration in education

There is no shortage of studies that highlight the importance of technology in education (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiago, 2017; Kumar, Martin, Budhrani, & Ritzhaupt, 2019). The integration of educational technologies in education for purposes of instruction (Almpanis, 2015), learner support and assessment (Kibaru, 2018), development of an online community of learners (Abeywardena & Yoong, 2012), and many other uses, remains the single most important precursor to the changes that have taken place in the last few decades. Yet, fundamental questions about inclusivity in online education and how a socially just education system should look like remain unanswered (Broadbent & Poon, 2015). Researchers, designers, teachers, and other stakeholders who are involved in designing and providing online education

are unable to reach unanimity on the set of characteristics that the ideal online education system should have and the kinds of checks and balances that should be in place to guarantee inclusivity, rigor, and quality.

Yet, technology remains an integral part of teaching and learning and is touted to have increased access to quality education by disadvantaged members of the community such as people who dwell in inaccessible places (Abeywardena & Yoong, 2012), women (Beck & Ferdig, 2008), mobility-bound people as well as people who are susceptible to persecution such as people of alternative sexual orientation (Ghazali, Suhaimi, & Yusoff, 2021). This is especially true in developing countries such as in Sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia where rural communities generally receive limited infrastructure investment. Therefore, for most ODL learners, technology-enabled mediums remain the principal methods of accessing learning materials and support.

Although it is difficult to reach consensus about the attributes of a socially just, and inclusive online education system, there are great rewards that can be found in the responsible use of technology to close the chasm that exists between policy and practice (Hunt, et al., 2014). For instance, great strides have been taken in re-purposing social technology for use in educational settings to develop a community of learners (Abeywardena & Yoong, 2012), and to enable tutors to use collaborative learning techniques in their classes. In recent years, researchers have extolled the benefits of technology in designing problem-based learning and, in particular, in enabling the use of Informal Formative Assessments (IFAs) and Productive Failure techniques to design learner-centric learning activities that are tailored to the realistic needs of individual learners (Kapur & Bielaczyc, 2012). Notwithstanding the prevailing contentions about the ethics of mining for learning analytics data, there are clear indications that (within established perimeters) technology can enable practitioners to use learning analytics to identify and address the root causes of learner apathy and therefore address the long-standing challenges of performance and retention in open and distance education (Griffiths, 2013).

Developing teachers' dispositions

There are currently few attempts by education scholars to engage in discourses about the value of teachers' disposition development to classroom practice; much less so in the field of distance education. Acknowledging the contention concerning the definition of disposition, in this paper we relied on the parsimonious definition provided by Thornton (2006) who defined disposition as "both cognitive and affective attributes that filter one's knowledge, skills, and beliefs and impact the action one takes in classroom or professional setting"(p. 55). Additionally, there is further contention on how we can put dispositional development in teacher education and what methods can be used to assess for and evaluate such dispositions. In particular, there are debates about whether dispositions can be "operationalized as observable traits and whether dispositions are malleable" (Zhang, et al., 2022, p. 40). Currently, teacher excellence is considered to result from a combination of teacher pedagogical skills and content knowledge (Hewitt, 2011). Researchers are, however, speaking out against this narrow approach by highlighting the use and value of dispositions in the process of teaching and learning. For instance, Wenzlaff (1998, p.565) argued that "teachers should be more than mere 'cogs' in a technical process of teaching and learning and they must possess the dispositions necessary to teach and reach students". Available studies on dispositions adopt a dichotomous classification; on the one hand, are dispositions that are encouraged and developed in teachers and are classified as Desirable Dispositions (DAD), while on the other are dispositions that are discouraged and are considered to inhibit teacher performance, and are called Undesirable Affective Dispositions (UAD).

According to Roberts (2006) the importance of DAD must come out explicitly in teacher education, as well as in the assessment of teacher excellence; in particular, in how the field of education uses both quantitative and qualitative indicators to measure teacher excellence. More often teacher success is measured by narrow quantitative indicators, with learner pass rate extensively used to denote classroom success. Francisco and

Celon (2020) and Gorky (2014) however highlight the value of DAD as a pertinent component of a community of practice; as a value that is at the heart of teaching and learning and which is embodied in such qualities as empathy, justice, courtesy, gentleness, kindness, and care. In the same vein, Singh and Stoloff (2007) advocate for the inclusion of noncognitive skills in the training of teachers and perceives dispositions as “valuable assets concerning both traditional school outcomes and the broader development of individuals” (p.5). But in the absence of biding policy to compel higher education institutions (HEIs) to strengthen disposition development in the teacher training curriculum, dispositions remain peripheral to the process of teaching and learning. Although dispositions are often part of the mission statements of HEIs, they are seldom explicit in operational stages. This is despite the growing body of international research that indicates that dispositions play an important role in facilitating high levels of teacher-learning connection (Bair, 2017). This is more so in ODL where tutors are often the only link learners have with the university, and tutors must ideally possess the dispositional wherewithal to diffuse high levels of learner anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions that epidemiological studies associate with studying through this mode (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010).

Institutional support and employee performance

In this paper, we restricted institutional support to policies, regulations, and monetary and non-monetary help that the institution avails to staff for the specific purpose of teaching and learner support (Falola, Adeniji, Adeyeye, Igbinnoba, & Atolagbe, 2020). According to Kotirde and Yunos (2014), institutional support is an indispensable variable in the teaching profession. Institutional support comes in many formats, but it is best personified by complex and multi-layered management roles that, in higher education institutions, are performed by a well-choreographed team of players with well-defined roles and responsibilities. Indicative research in education predominantly conceptualizes management roles as gatekeeping mechanisms that quality assure systems and processes in the institution with the overarching mandate of improving learner experience and performance (Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 2002; Ogakwu, 2010). However, we argue that this reductionist conceptualization is misleading as it disregard management’s allegiance to staff, undermines the role of staff as vehicles through which learners are served, and implies a top-down approach to managing institutions and therefore undervalues the role of staff as equal partners in a democratic and collaborative process of decision making and quality teaching and learning (Devi, 2016).

More than exercising authority over how work is done in organizations, management has the responsibility to provide resources and support to staff in order to facilitate the process of teaching and learning. In the field of open and distance education, this would entail, among other things, attending to the issues that are directly related to, as well as those that are peripheral to, the process of teaching (Guilbault, 2016; Haiyan, Walker, & Xiaowei, 2016). Although there is plenty of research that links institutional and supervisor support to high performance in teaching there is a shortage of qualitative studies on the perception of ODL tutors about the kinds of institutional support that they receive.

METHODOLOGY

This article draws on data that was collected as an extension of a data collection exercise for the corresponding author’s doctoral research. The study utilized a qualitative approach which is a user-centered way of involving “people in a meaningful dialogue about their perceptions in order to explore the intricacies of their everyday experiences” (Harvey & Taylor, 2013, p.3). A purposive sample of eight tutors who were engaged in teaching distance education learners was selected to participate in this study. Four tutors were chosen from Botswana Open University while four were chosen from Ba Isago University in Botswana. There were no requirements for gender representation, years of experience, or specific qualifications. Individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the participants using an interview

guide. Each participant was asked open-ended questions about the three areas of the study, namely, technology integration in education, the role of tutor dispositions in teaching, and perceived institutional support. Several follow-up questions were also used to develop and probe further the responses from the main questions. Although participants were asked to allocate an hour to the interview, on average, each interview lasted for about thirty minutes. The data from the interviews were analyzed using the six-step thematic analysis process proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006).

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This section begins with a discussion of the themes identified under the role of technology in facilitating effective instruction, followed by a discussion of tutor dispositions and lastly, the importance of institutional support. All participants have been given pseudonyms.

Perceptions about the role of technology

Facilitates access to information

Participants said that technology facilitated easy sharing of information between tutors, tutors, and learners, and between learners. The participants indicated that the institutionally-enabled learning management systems (LMS), coupled with institutional emails, provided reliable and convenient methods of sharing information. Although high technology competence can be expected of tutors, the participants indicated that technology can be intimidating, and therefore be a major hurdle to effective instruction among new students. One participant says “It is like teaching blindfolded. You assume your students are conversant with the medium used for teaching and there is no way of finding out for sure and little you can do once you find out” (Dr Mary). Access to effective instruction (we use access here in its broad sense) is, therefore, unequal among ODL learners, with learners who are conversant with technology in better stead to benefit from instruction than those who are not. This sentiment reinforces the works of Onyema and Deborah (2019) and Onyema, Eucheria, and Obafemi, (2020) who highlight the inherent challenges of teaching through technology in low-competence societies.

Growth of social media

All the participants noted the important role played by social media technology in education, particularly against the backdrop of the recent national lockdowns during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the participants noted that there were disparities in learner participation in educational social media groups. One of the participants said that “There are a lot of silent participants in these groups. It is generally difficult for us to monitor the groups and to compel some of the learners to take part in the discussions. These groups are for the benefit of the learners and you assume they know that” (Mr Thomas). The participants indicated that further research on learner participation in these groups is necessary as it may reveal whether minimal participation has any debilitating impact on learning, as well as whether there were any psycho-social and/or gender dynamics to learner participation in these groups. Anecdotal evidence reveals that social media groups are cesspools of power struggles and possible domination; hyperactive members often play the unofficial guardian roles, and if unchecked, may muffle the voices of other group members.

Data mining and personalized instruction

The importance of technology to mine learning analytics data which is used to guide the design of personalised instruction are some of the advantages identified by the participants on the role of technology in teaching and learning in ODL. Although the participants acknowledged that there are legal and ethical concerns surrounding the collection of student data- in particular that this data might be misused- the

participants believed that strict regulatory frameworks that stipulate what data can be mined, how, and for what purpose could safeguard such data from unscrupulous use:

It is a delicate balancing act. A strict framework- similar to those used internationally to safeguard the rights of subjects in research- could provide the necessary protection to students. Learning analytics is too good an opportunity for learning improvement to pass. In any case, the education field fares very well in terms of protecting subjects' data than how big corporations use customer data (Dr. Mark).

Participants believed that the benefits of collecting learning analytics for ethical use far outweigh the risk associated with such data being misused. One of the participants argued that “We cannot afford to lose the opportunities presented by big data to address the long-standing grievances of failing education systems and declining learner performance”, (Mr Kgotla). Studies on learning analytics support the proposition of designing operational frameworks that can guide data mining (Greller & Drachsler, 2012), as well as determining parameters of data use within institutions (Sclater, 2014). Such frameworks should curb the widespread practice by practitioners and researchers of using data collected for alternative purposes to justify decisions that erode diversity and therefore disadvantage minority students.

Perceptions about tutor dispositions

The participants perceived the development of tutor dispositions as important for effective instruction, citing an example of emotional intelligence as an integral part of desirable affective dispositions- as important when dealing with ODL students, most of whom are susceptible to feeling apathetic to their studies. One of the participants indicated that “Strengthening the development of the right dispositions on academic staff will enable us to develop meaningful relationships with our students and break the unhelpful professional barrier that restricts us from caring for the affective side of learning and learners”, (Mrs. Kgotla). One participant, Dr. King, noted that academic staff is compelled to “stay aloof from our students, outside the classrooms”, because academic staff lacks the skills to manage complex student-teacher relationships beyond the rigidly constrained classrooms interactions.

Despite universal unanimity on the importance of dispositions in teaching, especially in the field of distance education, several aspects, including the challenges associated with identifying, conceptualizing, and assessing for dispositions, continue to polarize debates. In this study we focused on the kinds of dispositions that should be made explicit in ODL teacher training and how these dispositions should be included and assessed in the curricula that train teachers in general, and those bound for ODL in particular. On the first objective the participants were asked to propose a list of teacher dispositions that they considered vital to effective instruction in distance education. The following dispositions were gleaned from the list proposed by the participants:

- open-mindedness and flexibility;
- passion for distance education;
- respect for diversity;
- empathy for learners;
- ongoing professional development;
- culturally sensitive; and
- pluralistic approach to teaching

This list satisfies the disposition assessment rubric designed by California State University and the list of dispositions deemed necessary for effective instruction proposed by Zhang, et al. (2022).

On the second objective, the participant indicated two ways by which tutor dispositions could be developed. First, the participants proposed that disposition development should be an integral part of teacher training

and that policy should guide the re-evaluation of the current criteria for teacher excellence in order to include qualitative indicators. Second, the participants also proposed that work-related Continuous Professional Development (CPD) should provide a channel to develop and reinforce desirable dispositions in the workplace among tutors who are already in the workplace. The participants said that since dispositions are context-specific, CPDs will allow for the design of training that is needs-specific and that is guided by work and institutional situations.

Perceptions about institutional support

All the participants said that institutional support was important in facilitating effective instruction. The participants classified this support according to the kind(s) of support, who provides the support, as well as what the support facilitates. On the whole, the kinds of support were classified into three broad categories; which are material support, pedagogical and technical support, and motivational support. Management was seen as responsible for the provision of material support that included financial resources, facilities and equipment, and the regulatory framework to enable staff to perform efficiently. On this issue, one of the participants said “We need resources, infrastructure and the systems and processes that guide how we operate. These are, of course, the preserve of management” (Mrs Mothusi). The participants indicated that the quality of material support directly impacted the quality of teaching and learning, and, therefore, had a direct bearing on the performance of learners. Some of the participants said that:

“Staff requires good infrastructure, classes, and furniture, to teach effectively. It impacts one’s morale if one has to teach in a less-than-ideal setting, supported by dilapidated furniture and outdated systems. It dampens one’s motivation” (Dr Kitso).

“Adequate infrastructure is a necessity. Many other forms of support come second. Nothing can get done if the basic infrastructure is not available” (Ms Smith).

These sentiments corroborate the findings of Falola et al. (2018) who found increases in employee satisfaction, commitment, and creativity when employees perceived that they received adequate institutional support.

Pedagogical and technical support was conceptualized as the support provided by auxiliary staff which included support at the interface of learning, such as technical support, administrative support, including student registration, and many other duties that facilitate the process of teaching and learning. Pedagogical and technical support was seen by the participants as very important as this support linked the teachers and the learners, coordinated elements that bring about effective instruction as well as impacted learner experiences and therefore shaped learner approaches and motivation. One of the participants said “Teaching is a collaborative job that brings together different people. Each person plays a specific role. But I think the support that enables effective teaching and learning is very crucial to the performance of learners than other forms of support.” (Mr Tiro). These findings support the study by Falola et al. (2018) who found that “when technical support goes up by 1 standard deviation, Faculty job responsibilities go up by 0.84.” (p. 5). In other words, increases in pedagogical and technical support translate to increases in staff performance, which in the case of institutions of higher learning, mean increases in learner performance.

Last, the participants said that motivational support which included access to training and continuous professional development opportunities, mentoring, and coaching that is aimed at improving the skills, attitudes, and motivation of staff was important for effective instruction. This kind of support could come in the form of cooperative and collaborative exercises with other staff members as well as from inter-institutional collaborations. Although this form of support is seen as peripheral to teaching and learning- in that it is seldom intended to influence or change the tutor’s classroom modus operandi- it can rejuvenate and motivate staff. According to Joo, Joung, and Sim (2011), this kind of support positively influences tutors’

attitudes towards their jobs, impacts learner experiences, and flow experience, and generally results in the attainment of organizational objectives.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As the provision of higher education becomes rapidly borderless, and institutions can no longer enjoy the protection and affordances that local conditions provide, there is a need to improve and diversify the ways that institutions support staff. More than ever skilled staff has become highly mobile, valuable, and sought after. Organizations are looking to maximize their return on the investment they make on staff and the starting point is to understand staff's perceptions about different aspects of their jobs, and in the case of this paper, the perceptions towards technology, tutor disposition, and institutional support. In the case of technology integration in learning, there is a need to introduce new students to learning through computers. An introductory module that bring learners up to speed on basic principles of technology-mediated learning will address the discrepancies found in classrooms where learners have to contend with their academic workload while still grappling with the medium used for teaching.

Although the participants emphasized the importance of dispositions in teaching and there is a growing body of international research to substantiate this, it is still necessary to discern which tutor dispositions are necessary for effective instruction. Further contextualized research in this area will provide better knowledge and therefore inform decisions on how we can develop teacher candidates' dispositions, how we can evaluate these dispositions, and, importantly, how these dispositions can be operationalized in the classrooms to improve learner performance. Distance tutors work with learners from different contexts who have linguistic and cultural differences and there are likely to be dispositions that are more useful in some contexts than others. More research on what dispositions are necessary in which context is needed in order to fill this lacuna. In the face of an increasing division of labor and the emerging of para-professions within the teaching profession, institutions need to streamline their systems and processes, especially those that support staff, quality assure teaching and learning, and those that improve learner experiences. This may just be the missing piece of the puzzle to address the poor performance, learner disengagement from their studies and high attrition rate in distance education.

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