Experiences of Distance Education Students with Their Study Modules: The Case of University of Education, Winneba (UEW), Ghana

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ABSTRACT: Design of distance education course materials is the single most important aspect of any distance education program. In recent times, many have questioned the experiences of the learners in the use of their course modules. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to find out the experiences of the distance education students in their use of the course modules (learner-content interaction), to see how it has been engaging, effective and efficient in their distance learning journey. Five graduates of the UEW distance education programme were chosen at random for this study and the in-depth interview guide was used to gather data. The four major themes that emerged from the phenomenological reduction process of the learners' experiences with the distance education course modules were the user experience; module content; interactivity of the modules; and assessments. The findings of the study were that respondents had positive experiences in user experiences, module content, and interactivity of the modules. They however had not so good experiences with the assessment practices of their program. The findings only confirm the importance of learner-content interactions in distance education, it also adds to the limited literature on learner-content interaction in distance education in the developing countries like Ghana.

KEYWORDS: Learner-Content interaction, distance education course design, andragogy, phenomenological inquiry, distance learner experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education (DE) is rapidly emerging as one of the popular ways to gain knowledge, with students able to access flexible education that allows them to juggle work and study. Distance education is a model that proves that education has no boundaries and therefore no matter where we are, gaining knowledge is now more accessible worldwide.

One of the most important aspect of any distance education program is the design of course materials. The DE students' primary mode of interaction in their education is the course materials. Whereas the classroom interaction has the luxury of presence of a teacher, this is absent in the case of the DE student. Instructional materials that have been designed effectively will promote the achievement of learning outcomes for distance learners. Effective design of Distance education materials relies on instructional design processes and methods that reflect the absence of a 'live' teacher or instructor. The design of DE materials must first recognize the learner is not in a traditional classroom setting with instructor facilitating the learning process. Issues as learner motivation, attention to content, understanding of relevance of the subject matter and ability to have social interaction with other learners are not easy to facilitate in distance learning. Rowntree,(1986: 156) agrees with the difficulty of designing for the distance education learner when he says, ' the self-instructional materials must carry out all the functions a teacher would carry out in the conventional situation, guiding, motivating, intriguing, expounding, explaining, provoking, reminding , asking questions, discussing alternative answers, appraising each learners progress, giving appropriate remedial or enrichment help among others'. Therefore, for a DE learning environment to be effective, efficient and appealing, the instruction must recognize and reflect these elements in the design of the learning materials.

Lately, stakeholders and learners in the field of the DE programs have raised concerns about the quality of the course materials in DE program in Ghana (Badu-Nyarko; 2006; Saah,& Osei; 2009. The complaints have come in the way that the course materials have been designed. A major principle of Instructional design is to plan the content around the needs of the learner and engage learners (Ertmer & Gedik 2011). If learners find course materials too technical and difficult to study, they will not find the course to be appealing or engaging. The scope of content in any DE must be sufficient so that the entire learning experience will result in

desired outcome (Simonson et al, 2000).   There is not much information in the literature on how the distance education course materials are designed in Ghana and how these have been effective or engaging for the distance learner. In this study, the focus will be on the experiences of the distance education students in the use of the course materials. The understanding is that, the DE student is the ultimate user of the course materials and they are the best people to judge whether the course materials as they have been so designed helps them achieve their learning outcomes.

The purpose of this study was to shift the focus from the module writers to the students by exploring the experiences of the DE students in the use of the course modules to see if it is aligned with interactions in distance education in general and more specifically, learner-content interaction. The study will give a better understanding of the learner-content interaction in UEW distance education program with relation to the course modules.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The effective design of instructional materials for distance education, rely on instructional design process that reflect the absence of or reduction in face to face instruction (Brown &Voltz, 2005). This change in learning context is a critical factor that distinguishes distance education from the traditional education and thus requires a different instructional design consideration that caters for the absence of a 'live' instructor. The focus of instructional design in distance education is to activate and support deep learning in the individual learner and not on the type of media that used to deliver instruction (Williams et, al, 2011). This can be achieved by integrating a variety of interaction elements such as, relevant information, instruction and learning activities of both social and nonsocial nature, language style, use of previous knowledge, timely feedback, and assessment, among others (Zimmerman, 2012).

Interaction is one of the critical elements in any educational venture and distance education. Interaction in whatever form in DE aims at reducing isolation of individual learners, making learners adjust to new environment and add variety of experiences to their learning experiences. Interaction has been defined by many ways, and it is mostly defined by the level of involvement of students in instructional space. Bernard et. al, (2009) see interaction as active learning; Hennigan (2016) conceives of it as taking place when there's a two way contact with another person; and Moore (1993) describes three types of interaction relative to education as: the interaction between learner and teacher, learner and content and learner-learner. The separation (distance) of learner and teacher is what defines distance education. According to Moore (1993), this distance might be both geographical and psychological and he termed such separation as transactional distance. Bridging the transactional distance between the learner and the teacher is essential because the goal of such interactions is to stimulate, motivate, and facilitate educational activities (Anderson & Garrison, 1998). The primary interaction of the DE learners is with the course materials; these will be the prominent voice they will hear throughout the instructional period. The interaction of the learner –content, is also the fundamental form on which all education is based (Vrasidas & McIsaac, 1999). The learner-learner is where learners interact with other learners, alone or in groups with or without the presence of the teacher (Moore &Kearsley, 2011). Effective interaction between learners expose them to different viewpoints and promote critical thinking skills as a results of the synthesizing and evaluating each other's contribution in class ((Zimmerman, 2012)).

Moore's(1988) seminal definition of interaction in education into the three groups of learner- instructor, learner- learner and learner - content is the widely accepted definition and these have been the major themes in interaction research(Sinclair et, al 2017). Other researchers in the field of distance education have attempted to add unto the initial definition by Moore, for instance, Anderson and Garrison (1998), proposed a three additional expansion to the definition of interaction by adding a teacher- teacher interaction, teacher- content interaction and content- content interaction. The introduction of the teacher-content interaction, content-content, and teacher-teacher interaction was a way of examining challenges that instructors have with course technology Anderson and Garrison (1998). Teacher-content studies the structure and flexibility of the course, it also examines how teachers connect with one another to enhance their interaction with the course. Anderson mentioned teacher-teacher interaction as a way of further enhancing the comfort level in their profession and Suggests that teachers attend virtual conferences and technological options to develop their comfort level with and knowledge of technology. Finally, content-content interaction is used to discuss the ways in which the course can be structured to have the technology help to deliver the various types of content (Zimmerman, 2012). Zimmerman (2012) however sees the Learner-self interaction as part of the learner-content dimension.

Hillman et al (1994) also proposed a fourth type of interaction that is peculiar to distance education as learner- interface interaction; Learner-interface proposes that for distance education courses, the learner has to interact with some form of technology medium as part of the course requirements (Zimmerman, 2012). Jung, Choi, et al (2002) proposed a three types of asynchronous interaction in web based learning environment: content-centered academic interaction, which happens between learners and instructor or between learners and online resources; collaborative interaction among learners; and social interactions between learners and instructor' (Jung et al., 2002: 154). Notwithstanding these various 'new' definitions of interaction in education and distance education, Moore's classification remains the dominant framework for interaction discourse.

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Research on interaction in education and distance education, occur in the three types of interaction by Moore. In Bernard et al (2009) meta-analysis of previous research, they found 10 studies on learner-learner which indicated that the interaction had an important effect on student learning.. There was however more studies (44) on learner-instructor interaction and just about 20 studies on learner-content interaction. None of the studies in Bernard et al.(2009), was solely on how learners interacted/ or experiences with course materials or content in distance education. Research on interaction in distance education has been mostly done in the area of learner-learner (Perraton, 2004) learner to Instructor (Garrison, 2000; but learner- content interaction in distance education, has seen less research relative to the other two types of researches(Zimmerman, 2012; Xiao, 2017). Xiao (2017) even calls the learner -content in distance education as the weakest link because of the lack of research into that area. Xia o (2017), calls for the further investigations into the learner-content interactions, according to him, learner-content interaction is a critical component of learning in any environment . Thus this study which focuses on the experiences of the distance education students on the course modules (learner -content), will look at the various studies done in the area of learner-content interaction in distance education.

Of the limited number of research done on learner-content interaction in distance education, the findings are mixed. Rhode (2009) for instance found that online learners rated learner-content variables as the highest value in the online education. The research found that the learners' strongest interaction concern was on a structured and well-organized course materials that was premised on clear procedures and expectations. Their studies found that the more complex, the instructional content, the more engagement that is needed for students to understand the elements of learning, to achieve the objectives required and to use the course materials in real life applications. According to Tsang (2010), the more engaged the student is with the course material, the higher the retention rate.

Zimmerman (2012) examined the learner-content interaction as an indicator of success (higher grades) in online settings. She looked at the relationship between time spent with course materials and students' grades. The study found that students who interacted frequently with content, achieved higher grades in their online courses, the reverse is that, those who did not interact frequently with the course content, did not score high marks. Bethel (2009), studies also found that learning performance and learner satisfaction can be improve if the multimedia used in the virtual learning space, offers more learner-content interaction. Kuo & Belland (2016) studies on what students wants with regard to interaction in distance education found that , majority of the students were more concerned with their course content than participating in a classroom community(learner to learner interaction). Perhaps the closest study that sought to examine the experiences of distance education students with the course materials was that of Nandi et al (2015); their study was on the relationship of content to course design and consequent outcomes for students. The results of that study found that the most critical criteria for effective learner- content interaction in the study was the structure and organizations of the content management systems.

Despite all these studies on learner-content interaction, none of the studies have been done in a developing country like Ghana and on the experiences of the distance education students experiences with the course modules. Besides, most of the recent researches are done in e-learning or online interaction as most universities have departed from the use of print based materials to internet technologies. The learner-content interaction is seen as critical in education(distance education) as its defines the characteristics of education' in that the process of intellectually interacting with the content results in the changes in learner's understanding, the learner's perspectives, or the cognitive structures of the learner's mind(Moore, 1989, p. 2). Moore places so much important on learner-content interaction and even said that without this kind of interaction, there cannot be education. Anderson (2003) is of a similar opinion and sees learner- content as very important in any educational setting. Other researchers (Rhode, 2009; Sims & Koszalka, 2008) have also recognized the fundamental role learner- content interaction plays in distance learning.

Interaction in distance education does not just happen (Banna et al, 2015), there should be some intentionality about it. Interaction must be designed into the instructional course module. Whereas in the traditional classroom, the teacher can create interaction in any form at random and unplanned, this is not the case in DE. Parker (2020) holds that, no distance education program can be perceived of quality if interaction is absent from its course or program design. Jaggars & Xu (2016) are of the view that, the mere presence of interaction in education, does not lead to quality as the presence of interaction is not sufficient to improve student learning. Instead, there should be a clear purpose to facilitate content delivery (Baran & Correia, 2009; Naidu, 2013), and this is done through intentionally designing the distance education course modules with interaction elements.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Knowles (1975, 1995) andragogy theory is of particular relevance to this study, according to him: andragogy as the' art and science of helping adults learn" (1980, page 43). Core this theory are the six assumptions that Knowles proposes; the need to know, the learners self-concept, prior experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning and motivation (Knowles 1995). Knowles, (1995, places value of experience in their lives at a premium, and that "authoritative teaching, examinations which preclude original thinking, rigid pedagogical formulae–all these have no place in adult education" (p. 37). Marshak (1983) describes andragogy to

be characterized by a problem/project orientation; the use of experienced-based techniques; the facilitation of self-motivation to encourage learning; and, in general, the pivotal role of the learner in acquiring new knowledge or skills"

Research has shown that majority of distance learners in most universities worldwide are adult learners. (Dorst & Reymen 2004). According to Cochran and Brown (2016), if the assumptions of andragogy are applied to instructions, the needs of the learner will best be met.

Using this framework as a lens to look at the course module will give evidence as to the extent to which the modules were designed with the students in mind. Thus, the study will look at how the course module have been effective and engaging for the students. More specifically, if the modules made use of prior experiences of the learners, their orientation to learning and motivation, their readiness to learn, among other concepts. It will also look at how the modules were designed to incorporate such concepts.

METHODOLOGY

The study sought to find answers to the main question: How do students of UEW distance education describe their experiences with using the course modules? The study focused on the lived experiences of the students studying at a distance at UEW. It used the phenomenological methodology to gather data for the research. The nature of the research question warranted the use of this methodology. Phenomenology is concerned with the 'meaning of livid experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomena' thus 'exploring the consciousness of human experiences' (Creswel, 2017:51) This methodology helps to find out the experiences of the distance learner in the use of the course modules, specifically, how the course modules have been engaging, and effective in achieving the learning outcomes.

Participants

The main criteria for selecting the participants were that; one must have graduated from the distance education program at UEW in the last year or two; must have graduated from the Business Administration, Human Resources option; and would be able to consciously articulate their learning experiences. This was to compare the experiences of the students on the same program to ascertain whether there are differences in the experiences. A recruitment flyer was posted on the notice board and at the end of the advertised period, seven people applied to take part in the study. Five respondents (Rita, Beulah, Joan, Susie and Ella) were chosen at random from this group and these were given pseudonyms to hide their identity.

Data Collection procedures

Phenomenological studies mainly rely on in-depth interviews to gather information. The optimum number of participants is ten or less and in-depth interviews may go as long as two hours for each session (Creswell, 2017). The interview guide was made up semi structured questions that gave some freedom to participants to answer and at the same, gave some structure so as to direct the participants should they stray from the main topic under discussion. The choice of a semi structured interview guide also reflects the importance of co-construction between the research and the participants (Liu, 2008). The research question and the theoretical framework was used to design the interview guide. In all, five participants were interviewed many times over the process with each interview lasting between one hour and one hour thirty minutes.

Apart from the interviews, other documents were analyzed to gather data for the studies. Some course modules in the Business Administration Human Resources options were also analyzed.

Data Analysis

The goal of the phenomenology analysis is to get understanding from the livid experiences of the participants. In this research, the phenomenological reduction process was used; this is where the researcher continually returns to the essence of the experience to derive the inner structure or meaning in and of self (Liu, 2008). The interviews were transcribed from the recordings and I immersed ourselves with the notes made from the document analysis as well. The coding of the study was then done by open coding or coding line by line.

The data was divided into themes, and statements were marked. Learners' experiences with the distance education modules were complex issues with many factors coming into the mix. To understand how these factors, relate to the interaction of the students with the content or their experiences with the designed course modules, data was grouped into themes and these are presented as the findings below.

Findings/ Discussion

Several themes emerged during the research interviews and these were grouped under four main themes. The four major recurring themes about the learners' experiences with the distance education course modules were the user experience; module content; interactivity of the modules; and assessments.

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User Experiences
For the user experiences, the study was looking at the organization and presentation of the course modules. Here I wanted to find out how the course module has been organized in terms of goals of the course, the structure of the course, pre-requisites, learning aids that one will need to navigate the course, the timeliness of the distribution of modules, among others.

The respondents had mixed review of the organization of the course modules. All the respondents indicated that most of the modules were clear on the structure of the course, the guidelines on how to study the course, indication of learning aids, among others. Although this was clear in most of the course, two of the respondents said that some   core courses did not have such clear organization on how to navigate the course module. For instance, Joan, said this in reaction to the question;

> 'Personally, I find the module on ……. quite difficult to navigate; it was difficult to understand
> what we were supposed to study'

Respondents were unanimous on the timeliness of the distribution of the course modules. They all bemoaned the delays in the distribution of the course modules. Apart from the late receipt of the modules, the respondents mentioned that they do not get the full complements of the all their course modules. Rita,- in responding to the question about the timeliness of the modules said;

> 'at first I got 3 instead of 6, and got the rest from my predecessors. In fact when I know the courses
> for the next semester then I start searching for my books. I don't wait for the modules because it
> delays, you can get as low as two books for five courses'
> 'well, we normally have problems with the modules, most times the modules doesn't(sic) come
> on time…'

Respondents were of the view that although they were supposed to be oriented on how to study the modules, this is not the case in practice. In answering the question on this, Ella, remarked that;

> 'We were not given any orientation on how to study the modules in most of the courses.'

Susie, disagreed and said that;

> we were told how to use the modules during the first tutorial session. 'Although not all the
> course did this, but for the most part, I was given that orientation.'

In the distance education literature, organization and presentation of learning materials are very critical in promoting learning. The Quality Matters standards stipulate that, ' instructions make clear how to get started and where to find various course components' (Quality Matters Program, 2014). For an adult learner who already has competing demands, having clear and articulate instructions on how to navigate the course content, helps in promoting learning for such a learner. Research has stressed the importance of having a well-structured course with 'intuitive navigation' (Jaggars & Xu, 2016).

Module Content
The study again looked at the content of the course materials itself. It focused the subject matter, and its relation the subject comprehensiveness or the quality or detail of the course, the difficulty level or ease thereof, use of previous knowledge, different learning styles, among others.   Content is perhaps one the most critical aspect of any educational endeavor.

Although all the respondents had mixed reviews of the content of their course modules, they were however unanimous on the difficulty level of the course modules. They agreed that some of the courses were easy to understand, whilst some were difficult to understand or follow. There was a particular course that all five respondents mentioned as being difficult to understand or follow. They were of also of the view that some of the course content was too much and loaded, making studying of such courses difficult for them under the circumstance. For instance, Joan said this of one of her courses;

> ….a book like economy of Ghana, total useless to me. Voluminous book with irrelevant stuff….

This finding confirms a study by Kenny et al (2014) that reports that distance learners had difficulty with their courses. Thus the suggestion by Dumais, et al.,(2013) on the consideration of the learner characteristics in design of distance education course modules comes in handy. Knowing their characteristics (prerequisite knowledge, educational level among others) will help tailor the course to meet such need.

An interesting twist was observed during the interview stage; the courses that the students mentioned as being easy to understand were those ones that are in their professional fields. This means, that they are familiar with the course before they started their distance education journey. This brings the issue of use of previous knowledge. For instance, Beulah said of the a course module;

> ….., a course like business management, secretaryship because I went to a secretarial school, so it was very easy for me,
> but for course like quantitative technique, statistics, principle in accounting and others, these are the calculations and I need
> extra tutoring'

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Adult learners fare well if they are made to use their prior knowledge in any learning activity. The above research finding confirms Merrill (2002, 2007) principle of instruction which states that' Learning is promoted when existing knowledge is activated as a foundation for new knowledge'. It also validates one of the assumptions of Andragogy which makes use of prior knowledge in course development for the adult learner.

Interactivity of course modules
The sub theme of interactivity of the course module was unearthed during the interviews. Here, issues like the language of the module, the application of the course to real world situations, use of examples or humor, opportunity to interact with peers through group assignments or projects were discussed.

All the respondents had positive comments on the language of the module on some of their courses. There was a particular course module that all the five had problems with; they indicated that they had issues following or understanding that course modules. For instance, a respondent said of the one of their course modules, when asked if the language of the course modules made reading engaging or understanding, Rita explained as;

> ' that is also an issue, some were very good but others were not edited at all so you feel
> stagnated when reading that module (language) wasn't so done well so you keep reading the
> same thing over and over, and you wouldn't understand at all

The primary interaction of the DE learners is with the course materials; these will be the prominent voice they will hear throughout the instructional period. Therefore, the language of the course module is important, a conversational style is what UEW adopts in its module development. It is one of the important aspects the module writing processes. Here, module writers are taught to make the language conversational and personal in nature. The aim of the conversational style is to actively engage the learner in their learning environment.

The opportunity to apply what the respondents learnt in class was discussed during the interview sessions. The researchers wanted to know if learners engaged in authentic tasks or project tasks that gave them opportunity to transfer their classroom learning into practice. Merill (2002, 2007), asserts that learning is promoted when learners are given the opportunity to apply learning in authentic tasks or real-world situations. Learner engagement is heightened when the learning is transferable to real world situations (Sinclair, et al 2017).. Although not all the respondents answered affirmatively to the question on the use of authentic tasks for learning, Rita's explanation of one of her courses is;

> ' yes, a book like public relations, it talks about office etiquette, how to receive visitor as a
> secretary or administrator, your daily activities, strike actions, it teaches a lot. Its gives us the
> opportunity to practice as well'

In a study by Martin and Bollinger (2018), it was found that real world application was a strategy that distance education students rated as very important. Similarly, Martin and Bolliger(2018) found that students rated real world application as a very important strategy in their distance education programs.

Assessment/Feedback
The final theme that came out of the study was that of assessment and feedback. Here the focus was on the quantity, quality and timeliness of assessment and feedback from instructors. All the five respondents did not give positive answers to this question. They all bemoaned the lack of timeliness of feedback to their quizzes, assignments, and examinations. Beulah said this with regards to the timeliness of feedback on her exams.

> .. it delays, because we are many, sometimes it takes 3 weeks or a month to mark our tests, after
> that they input the data, discuss the results, before publishing the results..

This findings confirm other studies in which students have complained about delays in getting feedback on their assessments and assignments from their professor. For instance Lawlor, (2014) found that 75% of the study participants had challenges with delayed or ineffective feedback on their assignments. The timeliness of feedback has the benefit of greater knowledge retention, confidence in the ability to identify and comprehend why answers may have been wrong or otherwise (Sinclair et al., 2017).

The UEW modules have been designed such that there is a self-assessment exercise at the end of each section. The aim of such exercise is to help students understand the course understudy. Some of the respondents found this very useful and explained that it helps them master the course content. Susie in explaining this question, said that;

> …… our exams are based on the information in the modules and there's no exams question that
> is not in the module. The good thing about distance learning is, no matter what the question be,
> it will be answered in the module…

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This assertion by Susie is at variance with other studies by Kara et al., (2019), in which students complained about the difficulty level of their courses and the lack of clarity in assignments given them as was the case in studies by Dumais et al.,(2013) and Rao and Giuli (2010). Others were ambivalent about it, as they confessed overlooking it during their study of the course materials.

CONCLUSION

Generally, the respondents in this study appeared to have a positive experiences in the use the course modules. Majority of them were satisfied with the course user experiences, the content of the course module with regards to the difficulty level and amount of work. They were unanimous with their displeasure about the delays in receiving the course modules at the beginning of a new academic year and the lack of timely feedback on their assignments and exams.

The study contributes to the understanding of the experiences of the distance education students in the use of their course modules. The findings on only confirm the importance of learner-content interactions in distance education, it also adds to the limited literature on learner-content interaction in distance education in the developing countries like Ghana.

Future studies should be replicated in other departments across the Institute for Distance Education and e-Learning to investigate the experiences of the other students with their course modules.

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