

Distance Learning Programmes in Nigeria and the Question of Quality in Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

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Abstract Distance learning programmes are “alternative models” of the teaching and learning situation where students carry out their studies remotely via the internet or videos, cassettes or webcasts” in borrowed classrooms. The advantages of DLPs include: availability, self-directed, cheaper, little or no time spent in rigid classroom settings, accessibility, no travel expenses, and working at one’s convenience. These programmes can be quite exciting to those who can afford them in and out of tight schedules and they have become very popular in a modern and technological world such as ours. They afford working adults opportunities to further their educational aspirations without leaving their jobs. The present paper tries to examine the strengths and weaknesses of one of these programmes, the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in Nigeria, in order to ascertain its quality and positive impact on the learners. Our major findings are that distance learning programmes are needful but the laxities that come with them need to be checked for more qualitative student/ trainee output. The CPD in particular is a programme rich in content and purpose but its workability and *modus operandi* as designed by the British Council and The National Teachers Institute of Nigeria is not satisfactory. There is need for urgent reformations for the attainment of desired results in terms of quality.

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Introduction

As kids often say, A says its name in *play, say* etc. In the same way, *distance learning* plays out its name because it is a learning programme in which students conduct their studies remotely at home via computers, videos or cassette players. Distance learning programmes provide alternative models of learning for adult learners with very tight schedules at work, home or business, who are unable to make out time to attend a regular university or college. In other words, some higher institutions make their certificates and degree programmes available online and these programmes are fully under the control of reputable professors and lecturers. In such programmes, learners have easy access to their programmes online. All they need are; a computer with internet access and maybe a credit card to settle the bills.

A significant aspect of the long distance programme is that learners are left to study on their own and at their own pace. Usually, there are assessment and feedback forms to access the programmes. Sometimes, exams are conducted but these are done online. Students may have access to the university’s library resources online or hard copies of the course outline and content are made available to them. In long distance learning programmes, students apply virtually, register virtually and learn in a virtual classroom.

A Virtual Classroom

A virtual classroom is used to denote a situation where students work at their convenience in a secure online environment, for instance, many adult learners who have tight schedules in their work places, get home to attend to children before going off to bed. But they may decide to create for themselves a few hours to log on to the net to study for some hours before going to sleep. This is what makes the programme interesting and acceptable to many learners.

Learning Habits of the Adult Learner

The adult learner is usually an adult of 25 years and above who indulges in any learning activity. His learning

characteristics are often different from those of the younger learners. Adults tend to be very busy with little or no time for abstract theories and things that are not practicable. Learning that does not help them achieve set goals do not interest them. Consequently, many adult distance learning programmes have this as basis for their course designs.

John Daines et al (1993) in CPD course module I, noted some useful characteristics of adult learners which we may find useful. According to them:

- Adults bring to their studies a considerable store of knowledge and experience gained over the years, much of which will be relevant to what is being learnt.
- They bring established attitudes, patterning of thought and fixed ways of doing things to their learning.
- They can be expected to assume responsibility for themselves
- Adults may find it difficult to recall isolated facts and to learn under pressure... They also have increased powers of comprehension and of organizing material into meaningful wholes.
- Adults may not have been involved directly in formal education for some years, they will nevertheless have learnt a great deal in the course of their lives since leaving school.
- Adults are likely to lack confidence in themselves as learners and to under estimate their own powers. They tend to be over-anxious and reluctant to risk making mistakes. They will not want to fail or look foolish.
- Adults are unlikely to be satisfied with a time perspective that sees learning as a lengthy process in which the attainment of a desired objective is in the distant future.
- The learning commitment of adults is normally part-time. They often combine attending a course with family responsibilities and with full-time occupations.

In the area of adult expectations, they also noted that:

- Adults expect the tutor to know his/her subject well.
- He should show enthusiasm for the subject and have a sense of eagerness to teach and learn from others.
- He should be competent and should employ the necessary teaching skills when working with a group.
- Adults expect value for money they want to attend a course which is pitched at the right level, relevant to their needs and which matches their activities.
- They expect to be made to work and to achieve something as a result.
- They expect to be told how well they are doing as individuals and as members of a group.
- They expect to enjoy their learning they would not want to give up their time and money where the whole learning experience is sour, unexciting and not enjoyable.
- They expect their adult status to be recognized. They expect to be treated with respect and dignity on a course as elsewhere.

Our aim in this paper is to examine a long distance learning programme in Nigeria, the Continuing Professional Development (CPD), to ascertain its areas of strengths and weaknesses with regard to qualitative education. Using the words of Kosemani (2001:8), quality in education means better education in terms of quality and quantity of the products, relevance of the curriculum to the needs of the society and the appropriateness of the facilities put in place to cater for the needs of the learner in his/her peculiar circumstances. (Also see Kosemani (2007:2), Messiah and Ellah (2007:1)).

The Continuing Professional Development Programme

The CPD is a programme organized by the British Council and the National Teachers Institute (NTI) Kaduna,

Nigeria. It is a supported distance learning programme for the professional development of the English language teacher trainer. The course is divided into three blocks or sections with 15 modules, that is, five modules in each block. Below are the topics treated in each module.

Module 1: Teaching, Training and Adult learning.

This module begins reflectively with considerations on reasons why participants enrolled on the course, their expectations and what they hope to be doing in future. The study tasks considered the following:

Task 1: Preferred learning styles and distinctions between the activists and the reflectors.

Task 2: Personal study style

Task 3: Learning in adulthood and hindrances to learning

Task 4: Tale for trainers

Task 5: Contextual constraints and strategies for change, the issue of large classes and other infrastructural handicaps that typify the Nigerian educational sector. Hindrances are to be discussed and pragmatic ways to avoid these hindrances are to be suggested by participants.

Task 6: Characteristics of a good teacher.

Task 7: Personal Development; the tree of life. In this task, participants are expected to read someone's life story and then reflect on their own lives to identify their mentors, that is, those who influenced them to behave or teach the way they do. The other modules had the following topics:

Module 2: Models of language and learning, child observation strategies to determine how children learn.

Module 3: Interactive Approaches to language teaching. Three kinds of teachers are identified; the explainer, the involver and the enabler.

Module 4: This module is concerned with teacher trainer skills, techniques and approaches for in-service sessions and becoming a reflective practitioner.

Module 5: Equity issues in education, who does what in the world of work, home and school contexts. How do people feel about English and targets for change.

Module 6: The effects of story telling in language teaching and learning.

Module 7: Supporting trainee teachers in school; styles of supervision.

Module 8: Developing communication in the English language classroom.

Module 9: Equity issues in the English language class

Module 10: Assessment for learning, involving discussions on the philosophy of Assessment in Nigeria and self-assessment. Assessment of the four language skills.

Module 11: Creative use of teaching and learning materials

Module 12: Identifying and Addressing individual learning needs

Module 13: Supporting trainee teacher's English language development.

Module 14: Mentoring; reflection on supervision styles and roles, induction, what do mentors do?

Module 15: Pathways to success in teacher training.

In summary, the above headings cover the content of the CPD programme. The programme, we may say, is a well designed one which aims at transforming the teachers from a traditional, prescriptive and stereotyped teacher to one who is more innovative and creative in his methodology. In CPD, teaching is more interactive and communicative. It aims at presenting students/learners with different language situations in which they are encouraged to use the language and not just learn about the language. Teaching should be learner-centered and not teacher-centered as it was in the days of traditional language teaching.

Teachers adopting the CPD are expected to also reduce the teacher-talking time (TTT) and increase the student talking time (STT). They should move the action zones in the class to different areas, be a mentor, develop and employ language teaching materials and natural use of the language in different situations. In the words of (Oyatogun 2007:2)

The teacher's task is delicate, demanding and a truly exalted calling. In true teaching, there's no place for the authoritarian nor the person who is on an ego trip. What is important therefore is that we learn how to adapt to change, model the language to/for our learners and make them use it. Then, and only then, are we truly

teachers with a difference. This is the goal of CPD.

Now, the question is, with all the emphasis on communicative language teaching by CPD and other astounding qualities ascribed to the programme, what are its effects on the trainees? Are they really having a full grasp of the tenets, are they applying these features effectively in the actual learning environment? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the CPD as a distance learning programme? Would it have flourished better as a normal/regular university programme? Lockee, Moore and Burton believe that even an instructionally sound online course can fail to produce learning outcomes if students encounter a poorly designed web site.

Research Methodology/ Scope

For the purpose of this research, the CPD trainees in Port Harcourt, ten of them, shall be interviewed to find out some of the challenges and hindrances experienced by them as they underwent the course. The self-assessment notes of the two sets that have undergone the programme between 2006 and 2007 shall also be considered. Our research procedure involves the use of a questionnaire which contained questions bordering on the areas of concern and interest for our research, informal interviews, participant observation to supplement information from questionnaires and interviews.

Research Questions And Discussion

1. Were the modules accessible and easy to go through?

Four out of the ten trainees found the modules easy to access when they could visit a cyber café, although a few of the modules were not accessible to them. A trainee could not open her CD and another CD had to be burnt for her.

Re-enacting Lockee, Moore and Burton's (2002:2) argument that if students have difficulty navigating a website, then the online course fails to produce its learning outcomes, the evidence above has much to say in the area of the quality of the CPD in Rivers State.

2. Were you able to save some of your responses in your flash drive or diskette?

Trainee responses revealed that seven of them did not have flash drives and so were not able to save their responses in any device whatsoever. Four respondents did not have access to computers and could not make out time to visit the cyber cafes and had to rely on hard copies of the course. The disadvantage of relying only on hard copies is that it does not provide trainees with full opportunities to participate in all the tasks because some of the tasks could not be easily downloaded (for example, those that had pictures and video clips).

3. Was it difficult to save your personal responses in your course diary?

Trainee responses revealed that five of them did not fully understand what a course diary meant. Was it a real diary or a notebook used to record responses from the tasks? It is either the course writers did not fully explain to the trainees what they meant by course diaries, or the trainees did not read the guidelines and instructions sufficiently and this brought some confusion.

4. Was it possible for you to participate in the online group discussion?

Seven of the trainees did not even know that an online discussion group existed not to talk about participating in the group discussion. They had obviously not registered with the yahoo discussion group. Consequently, only the course coordinator was able to derive the benefits of the group discussion.

5. Do you have access to a computers or laptops either at home or in your offices?

Six of the trainees did not have access to computers either at home or at their places of work consequently, the entire course was laborious and inconvenient. Those that desired full participation had to visit cyber cafes and had to buy time for at least two hours and sometimes all night to be able to make meaningful progress in the course. It was an expensive project for them.

6. What would you say about the amount of time you dedicated to the course? Was it easy for you to make out time to work on your modules?

All the trainees agreed that it was difficult for them to make out time to study the modules. Most of them had tight schedules and found it easier and faster to go through the hard copies than to spend time online or on the computers.

7. How regular were you at study group meetings?

The trainees recorded varying degrees of irregularity at study group meetings due to their tight work schedules. At least 80% attendance is mandatory for trainees to successfully complete the course. Consequently, some just tried to show up even if it meant just before closure to be able to sign the attendance register. This has a lot to suggest in the area of quality and learner outcome.

We also discovered that at the end of the training, only six, representing sixty percent of the trainees, received the certificate of completion for fulfilling the eighty (80%) attendance requirement. There was only one male trainee among them.

8. Were you able to complete all tasks in all the modules?

Sadly, not all the trainees were able to complete the tasks in the modules because of insufficient time. Four of them had to rely solely on the discussion during the study group and tutor group meetings. Those that were irregular at the meetings promised themselves that sometime later; they would take time to go through the modules because according to them, the material is very rich.

9. If there had been some sort of assessment, maybe a test or an examination on all of the modules would you not have made out time to go through the 15 modules?

Certainly, the entire trainees responded in the affirmative. They would have made out time to study the modules if they had been required to write an exam.

10. How has the CPD affected your teaching?

All the trainees believed that the CPD had affected their style of teaching in the following areas:

- Reducing TTT (Teacher talk time) and increasing STT (students' talk time).
- Changing their action zones in the classroom
- Becoming more reflective practitioners
- Mentoring
- Gender balancing
- CLT, making their teaching more interactive and communicative
- Introduction of games as a teaching methodology
- Devising Instructional materials in language teaching

11. What are the major challenges you faced during the course?

Some of the challenges recorded by the trainees are in the following areas;

- Insufficient time (to dedicate to the course)
- Lack of computers/laptops to work with at home
- Visiting cyber cafes was an expensive and inconvenient venture.
- Lack of motivation in the form of allowances, donation of laptops by government, etc.
- Payment of fees was very discouraging for the second batch of trainees.
- Lack of certification. A diploma should have been given instead of a certificate of completion to increase motivation.
- After the training, what next? Trainees were not sure their training would be utilized by government and other agencies. Two years after the training, NTI Port Harcourt was yet to utilize their services in spite of their (NTI's) promise to make them permanent trainers.

12. How would you rate the CPD programme?

The trainees believed the CPD programme is;

- Very educating

- Well-packaged by skillful practitioners
 - A must for every resourceful English teacher and teacher trainer
13. What would you record as the advantages of the CPD in your life?
- Reduced fright for the computer and the internet
 - Provided opportunity to use the computer
 - Built good networks among trainees since it was a nationally based programme.
 - Exposure to more interactive teaching methodologies.

General Discussion

The world has become very technical and most things are available online because of the current process of globalization.

Consequently, adults have realized that with the demands of living in a technological society and the demands on most working adults (and parents), there is a need to have classes during off-work periods. If they do not do this, they may have to terminate all the educational ambitions they have. This need has brought about the evolution of part-time programmes and long distance learning programmes, of which CPD is one. The advantage these programmes have is that they are more convenient and less stressful than the regimented campus programmes.

However, these programmes have some disadvantages especially when the question of quality comes in. Many scholars have castigated long-distance learning because of the "flimsiness" and "unseriousness" usually associated with them, as our study has also shown.

Conclusion and Recommendation

We have tried to show in this in this paper that long distance learning programmes are needful in a technological world as ours. But we have also seen the laxity that it also brings, reducing the qualitative standard of the programmes. There is therefore a dire need for urgent reformations to improve the quality of our long distance programmes, in our own context, the CPD. As Grandhe (2009:2) pointed out, there are two aspects of quality in the educational context: quality of the system as a whole and quality of what the system offers to the learners. We may agree that the CPD is excellent in purpose and content but the mode of application in the Nigerian context is sadly not satisfactory.

Based on our findings in this study, we suggest the following reformations:

- All trainees must be computer literate or be made to undergo ICT training as a prerequisite for attempting the course
- Computer or laptops must be made available at study group meetings for more illuminating discussions
- Government should donate laptops to all the participants or they be made to buy or own one before they are admitted.
- Tests/exams should be given at the end of each module.
- At the end of each block, there should be a weekend intensive meeting where trainees discuss and brainstorm on the tasks.
- Lack of certification is demotivating to the trainees. Let proper certificates or diplomas be given.
- There should be proper monitoring of trainees' academic events and progress by the tutor and the agencies involved (NTI and the British Council)
- Teaching practice sessions should also be organized at the end of each block to afford trainees opportunities to practice what they have studied.
- Trainees should also embark on mini-projects in their schools and colleges to training secondary

school teachers in the tenets of the CPD.

The above list is by no means exhaustive. But all hands must be on deck to make all academic programmes more qualitative than they are currently. We must continue to evaluate the overall effectiveness of our distance learning programmes in order to justify their existence in the country.

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