

ONLINE EDUCATION FOR CHANGING COMMUNITIES IN NIGERIA



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Abstract

Online education is not only an alternative to the face-to-face teaching method; it also complements the face-to-face teaching method, and brings about increased collaborative learning and interaction. This paper highlights some of the benefits of online education in Nigeria, reveals some of the challenges militating against online education in Nigeria, and suggests possible solutions to these challenges. Some of the benefits include: empowerment of learners, poverty eradication and better management of resources in terms of cost, time and facilities. Some of the significant challenges identified are: inappropriate/inadequate maintenance, no stable internet provider to support easy and fast learning and teaching, and erratic power supply. The paper suggests that these challenges can be tackled via the following means: accessibility of internet services and facilities by government, provision of adequate personnel and resources for maintenance and allocation of finance towards online education. The paper concludes that online education is a veritable tool for changing communities positively since the individuals that make up the communities can access education right where they are.

The term online education means something different to almost everyone who uses it. Some use the term to refer to pieces of content packaged using technical infrastructures. Some think only of web-based self-study, while others realize online education can encompass real-time learning and collaboration. Almost all also agree

that online education is of strategic importance. Almost all also agree that eLearning is an effective method that should be blended into a corporation current learning style.

Online learning is any learning experience or environment that relies upon the Internet/World Wide Web (WWW) as the primary delivery mode of communication and presentation. It can be considered as an aspect of distance education which is a type of learning activity that occurs when students and instructors are separated by geographic distance or by time. Online learning is supported by communication technologies such as television, videotape, computers, e-mail, and mail. There are potential benefits of investing in online learning for example, increased access to knowledge, improved quality of learning, better preparation of students for a knowledge-based society, "lifelong" learning opportunities, profit making, and many more. All these culminate in the empowerment of the individual. When individuals are empowered, communities are also empowered because communities are made up of individuals.

Online education can also be seen as the use of internet / Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to enhance and support teaching and learning process. It is a way of using wireless and internet technologies to deliver a broad array of training solutions. E-Learners access learning from computers via the internet through hand held devices like mobile phones, palm/ lap tops, etc or fixed devices like computer systems.

Rosenberg (2001) defined online education as “the use of Internet technologies to deliver a broad array of solutions that enhance knowledge and performance.” (p. 28). This definition has expanded to include wireless as well as internet technologies with the two technologies often working together to deliver focused learning to the target site. This is in contrast to classroom-based learning (c-Learning), which is a face-to-face group learning led by an instructor or subject matter expert. In online education environments, learners interact with learning materials, their instructors and other learners from various locations and often at various times using network technologies. So by its nature, online education offers significant flexibility as to when and how learning occurs. Online education can include independent, facilitated, or collaborative approaches to learning. Independent learning refers to each individual learner completing learning activities or modules, on their own schedule and in their own environment. The learner is independent of a facilitator and the other learners. This does not mean that the learner does not have access to other resources such as a facilitator or coach, but the learner is in control of whether to contact them, when to contact them, and why. Collaborative learning refers to working with other learners in an online environment. A typical example is an email discussion with other learners on a particular topic with everyone posting to a course room or a forum of educational group discussion on a particular subject matter, topic or issue. On the other hand, Facilitated learning is designed to be completed through interaction with instructors or coaches. There are several ways and methods to achieve this task, for example, a learner

might complete a section of learning on-line then discuss key concepts via e-mail with the instructor or with classmates. Online education can be synchronous (meaning learners are experiencing the learning at the same time) or asynchronous (meaning learners are experiencing the learning at different times) or it can incorporate both drawing on the strengths of each. Independent learning is, by definition, asynchronous. Facilitated and collaborative can be either asynchronous or synchronous.

Salleh, Oye and Iahad,(2010), described online education as the use of Information and Communication Technology e.g. Internet, computer, mobile phone, Learning Management System (LMS), Radios, Televisions and others to enhance teaching and learning activities. They see online education as a unifying term used to describe the fields on online learning, technology delivered instructions and web - based training.

It can also be defined as “a generic term covering a wide set of ICT technology-based learning, virtual classrooms, digital collaboration and networking” (Hambrecht, 2000 ; Kaplan Leisero’s online glossary). Also, others refer to it as teaching and learning that is web-enabled (Rosenberg 2001: 28-29, Govindasamy 2002: 288; Harrison & Anderson 2003: 2).

A community is a group of people living in the same area, having common interests and usually common background, history or origin. Members of a community usually tend to protect the interests of one another. Changes that affect individual members of a community end up affecting the entire community in the long run.

Advantages of online learning over classroom learning

Yucel (2006) pointed out the advantages of online education when compared to the classroom education as follows:

1. *E-examination*: students are administered many proof exams in the internet environment before the formal exams, so they can determine their approximate readiness levels.
2. *E-drills*: The Internet-based drill softwares with animations and intensive student-computer interaction can create an effective and productive studying atmosphere for students. For example, students can study on the softwares with or without sound effects.
3. *E-book and E-television*: the contents of the course books and TV programs could be presented on the Internet as e-books and e-television.
4. *E-counseling*: students are allowed to ask questions to their academic counselors related to their course contents on the Internet.
5. *E-sound book*: the e-sound book application enables especially the visually retarded students to listen to the course book contents on the Internet.

Others include:

6. *Flexibility*: Students have the chance to decide how long they want to be educated. Online education enables the individual to plan and direct his/her own learning process, so each student takes the responsibility of his/her own learning.

7. *Cost effective*: Students do not have to pay expenses for transportation of online education. Students do not also have to buy books as they can download them directly from the internet.

8. *Improves the individual*: Online education can raise standards and improve attainment by using self-paced, individualized and interactive materials to improve individual support to learners as they move up the system.

9. *Increasing retention and improving outcomes*: the use of personalized online guidance and support allows learners to take greater responsibility for their own learning at the pace and level appropriate to them.

10. *Broadens choices*: this is by making available new subject options and new learning methods to meet individual needs, including where learners are geographically isolated.

11. *Providing support for learner at risk*: this is by enabling careers and public services to link together in online communities of mutual support and expertise; also by increasing access to learning for handicapped and disable learner through the usage of intelligent tools and aids for personalizing the internet, linking them to other learners and reducing isolation.

12. *Removing barriers to achievement*: this is by providing new and creative ways of motivating and engaging pupils and learners of all abilities, enabling and inspiring everyone to attain their educational potential.

13. *Reducing the level of illiteracy*: this is by offering private and individualized feedback on their literacy, numeracy and ICT skills.

Benefits of online education to learners

The online education when judiciously and fully implemented would afford learners the following benefits:

(a). Reduce and/or eliminate the costs for instructor fees and materials to a certain level.

(b). Increased retention and enhanced hands-on application unlike traditional methods.

(c). Reduce time of learning and the time of teachers and employee's absence from duty.

(d). Help manage instruction and progress via portal.

(e). Make easy use of multimedia in practice and assessment according to learners' abilities.

(f). Allow for automated monitor of user's progress with supervisor and teachers.

(g). Be highly interactive as it engages users and pushes them than pulling them to progress.

(h). Help past learners go with their speed in any course and avoid redundancy.

(i). Make slow learners go on their own pace by eliminating frustration with themselves, their fellow learners, and the subject matter.

(j). Make knowledge cumulative as lessons are built consecutively and more flexibly.

(k). Make learning take place anytime, anywhere and greatly increases knowledge retention. (l). Assist e-learners to create, have access, view, modify and print or send documents.

(m). Enhance evaluation as it becomes self-paced because online education is a networked phenomenon.

(n). Make easy, delivery of content using standard Internet technology as it enhances surfability. (o). Online education supersedes training and instruction as it is a tool that improves behavior and performance.

The benefits of online education are too numerous to mention. It may be summarized as follows: cost-effectiveness, enhanced responsiveness to change, consistency, timely content, flexibility, accessibility, and providing customer value. Also there is emerging evidence that online education can help to improve attainment and raise standards of education (Olomo, 2001).

How online education changes communities

Empowerment of Learners:- As stated by National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004) one of the primary aim of the philosophy of Nigeria Education is to produce a self reliant citizen that can be useful to themselves, their society and to the development of the country at large. Online education engages learners with more active learning process. People in group or individual irrespective of their age could take responsibility for what and how they learn, achieving their personal goals as self-directed lifelong learners. Online education contributes to empower individuals to be self reliant and therefore empowered to contribute positively in their communities even without leaving the communities.

2. *Poverty Eradication:* - When members of a community are empowered, the result is poverty eradication and improved standard of living.

3. *Better management of resources:* - the limited resources are better managed and channeled to more productive ventures. This also results in positive changes in the communities.

5. *Generate unity among community members:* - since it is not limited by age or time, online education would enable a community, group and a workforce for the knowledge society would have a high proportion of people capable of continually updating their knowledge and skills, online education will help in managing knowledge transfer and contribute to practitioner knowledge in all its forms. This will improve unity as stated by NPE (2004).

Challenges of online education

Some of the challenges facing full implementation and maximization of online education are as follows:

- *Technophobia*: This refers to the fear of technology/ technological devices.
- *School Curriculum* : Use of these technological devices is not adequately covered in the curriculum
- *Inadequate and Inequality of access to the technology*: This could be due to cost, availability or erratic power supply
- *Software and License costs*: These costs may be enormous for individuals.
- *Maintenance and Technical Support*: lack or inadequacy of these may render the available facilities unusable.
- *Cybercrime*: Fear of being defrauded via the internet hinders some people from accessing the benefits of online education.

Summary

The advancement of online learning can raise standards and improve attainment by using self-paced, individualized and interactive materials to improve individual support to learners, increasing retention and improving outcomes by using personalized online guidance and support to allow learners to take greater responsibility for their own learning at the pace and level appropriate to them. Despite all the importance of e-learning, there are a lot of challenges impeding it such as electricity, technophobia, school curriculum, inadequate and inequality of access to the technology, software and license cost, maintenance and technical support, cybercrime. If the challenges can be reduced to the minimal, it will bring about the empowerment of individuals resulting in positive changes in their various communities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this review the following recommendations are made:

1. For online education to be effective, appropriate measures should be given to maintenances, provision of stable internet provider to support easy and fast learning and teaching.
2. Basic knowledge on how to operate computer and computer related tools should be given to both the students and staff.
3. Curriculum planners should try to integrate effective practical attainment strategy on how learners of online education can be evaluated for optimum functional education.
4. Electricity is one of the driving force and backbone of computer and computer tools, so Government should finance and connect Schools to stable electric grids.
5. The responsibility for computer study programme development for students and staff should be extended to all stakeholders and should not be limited to the ministry of education.

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