
Reaching the Un-Reached Through Open and Distance Learning System in Nigeria

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Abstract

Open and Distance Learning System (ODL) has become a common component of human development process both in developed and developing countries. Its utilization in the training programmes especially in the Commonwealth of Nations has been tremendous in the past decades. In Africa and other parts of the world, open and distance learning is being used or applied in bringing education and training to many clientele, especially, the un-reached such as the nomads, the disadvantaged like rural illiterate women, prisoners, street children, prostitutes, refugees, displaced persons of various forms etc. Open and distance learning system has been found to be effective in reaching the above enumerated un-reached groups. This revelation has however, been seen to be possible due to the enormous success results of open and distance learning system programmes in other sectors of human development such as teacher education and other higher education programmes. The focus of this paper has been to bring, to light how open and distance learning can help provide education and training to the un-reached in Nigeria.

“The illiterate of the 21st century” will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn” (Toffler, 2002). In view of the above assertion, it is very obvious that open and distance learning which uses communication technologies could be used in bringing education and training to those, for one reason or the other, cannot access education and training programmes.

Consequently, this group could be reached through the application of ODL systems programmes to education and other training programmes for human development purposes. All African societies have the problem of excluded disadvantaged groups e.g. young people who leave compulsory education, low qualified

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and unemployed adults, unskilled woman, migrants, disabled and other excluded groups. By involving these groups in the digital literacy, they will get more possibilities to avoid digital divide and be included into the society.

The Un-reached as Disadvantaged

Describing who is the un-reached poses a problem in many respects. One of such problem is on how to identify the disadvantaged groups. In the context of this work, the un-reached means those who cannot access formal education easily through the formal and conventional process, and the same time cannot be reached also easily with the provision of formal or conventional education process.

The changing process that Nigeria is going through can be expected to continue. It has been noted that no society in the present-day world is static. If development in a country did at any time become static, that society would have little chance to survive (World Bank, 1996). It is also in this direction that World Bank (1996) maintained that “societal processes, such as economies, strive for dynamic equilibrium with their larger environment (p.14). learning – both at the individual level and at the level of organically related group of people such as agricultural communities, women’s groups, street children – plays a very important role in that context. Learning allows people and communities to be proactive, to adjust to new circumstances and prepare for change (Klees Matangala, Spronk and Visser, 1997). While doing so, they contribute to further change in their environment that in turn, others have to cope with. Such change being continuous, learning also has to be continuous. It should not be restricted by age, time, space and/or circumstance.

In many developing countries, including Nigeria, the above groups are regarded as the un-reached and therefore marginalized or disadvantaged in access to education in the country. Further situation analysis makes it clearer. For instance, the National Commission for Mass Education established in the 1990s to cater for adult and non formal education has not done much to provide or make education accessible to most disadvantaged Nigerians in both the urban and rural areas who cannot continue their education. Rather, statistic of literacy rate in the country is usually prepared off hand to press for budgets year after year without any serious efforts on non formal education.

Low quality education is another serious problem facing the education sector, which is clearly reflected in the high repetition and drop-out rates for formal schooling. The system is suffering from bureaucratic centralization, a not-so relevant curriculum, and a traditional methodology of teaching. The absence of learning materials, especially of good quality and the strains caused by over overcrowding and a multiple shift system also contributing to low education quality (Klees, Matangola, Spronks and Visser, 1997). In Nigeria the un-reached could be grouped into the following: the disadvantaged citizens, the unemployed. They are the persons:

- Unemployed in the long and short term;
- Nationality minorities (such as immigrants);
- Older than 50 years;
- The citizens after retuning from execution of sentence and

- Health disadvantaged persons.

In Nigeria, still there are other unidentified un-reached people at present. More situation analysis of properly conducted will bring up such disadvantaged or the un-reached groups in the near future.

Reaching the Un-reached Learners in Nigeria: Situation Analysis

Nigerian is not actually alone in the community of nations to be concerned about the changing context of learning and in its desire to get the grips with that new context. Nigeria distinguishes itself from other countries to the extent that finds itself confronted with the phenomenon of un-reached learners and unmet learning needs. It is against the backdrop of the above considerations that the Nigerian government is interested in seeking an adequate response to the problem of un-reached learners and unmet learning needs in the country. The purpose of this paper is to identify appropriate intervention approaches to meeting the needs of learner of the un-reached in the country. However, the problem of the un-reached being a complex one, the approach to creating such a response is by necessity, also complex. There is a definite desire by all parties or stakeholders concerned not to reduce this complexity by suggesting that the solution would lie in setting up pilot projects somewhere to deal with some kind of partial and isolated situation in which learning is an important element, but without a clear idea as to how to get beyond the pilot phase. Against the above backdrop, the following processes could be followed.

1. Learning Survey

In this exercise, an overall exploration would be undertaken by adult education experts to get to know the broad range of learning needs in the Nigerian society, their relationship and prioritization, the available resources to respond to them, as well as to explore the potential of alternative pathways to learning in that context. Distance learning is the catch phrase often referred to in this connection.

However, the discourse and practice of distance education are often rather narrowly restricted to replicating models prevalent in the formal education system, thus doing little to cross barriers to learning that are implicit in the underlying assumptions of the formal education system.

2. Development of Non-formal Education Project

The second step in the process will consist of the specific and detailed design of a non-formal education project aimed at the development of learning without frontiers in Nigeria, starting in a specific geographical area. As part of the same approach towards a gradual development or learning without frontiers, the initial project will focus on a particular group of audiences and their varied intended learning needs (Waldrop, 2010). In addition, a set of media, approaches and processes, designed to work in concert to create a response to the learning needs in Westion, should be identified as part of this second step. Waldrop (2010) noted that what will be selected should be significant and be chosen with a view to ensuring that success created in a

still limited area of concern will have the best chances possible to promote similar developments elsewhere in the country.

Open and Distance Learning and Reaching the Un-reached

Leonard (2010) opined that to distance education is a modality to facilitate learning in a flexible and open manner, in a world in which work and learning become more and more intertwined.

The success of Open Distance learning (ODL) institutions has contributed to increased credibility and acceptance of distance learning systems as an effective mode of teaching and learning. How can the un-reached be reached through open distance learning system in Nigeria? The following situation analysis could subsist for Nigeria:

Distance Education or Distance Learning

Is a field of education that focuses on the pedagogy, technology, and instructional system designs that aims at delivering education to students (learners) who are not: “on-site” in a traditional classroom or campus.

More and Kearsley (2005) have described distance education or distance learning as a process of creating and providing access to learning when the source of information and the learner are separated by time and distance or both. In other words, distance learning is the process of creating an educational experience of equal quality for the learner to best suit their need outside the classroom. Distance education courses that require a physical on-site presence for any reason-including taking examination online is considered a hybrid or blended course of study (Daniel, 2010).

Reaching the Un-reached Through Radio Circles

The author advocates often distance learning system (ODL) using the radio circle. Radio circles means providing learning needs to learners who have been grouped based on their identified and prioritized learning needs. Radio has been found to be a very effective medium for reaching the un-reached because; it is available, accessible and effective in programme intervention especially, at community level.

The member of the radio circles usually meet in a chosen venue, as agreed by all the members to be accessible to all of them. During each meeting, usually at a particularly time and days within the week days, members assemble to listen to a radio broadcast usually packaged and delivered to the learners from a radio station.

The radio teacher broadcasts the programme from a radio station while the learners sit around the radio, listens to the programme and later ask questions in which the radio facilitator(s) usually assists learners in resolving their problems concerning the programme presented by the radio teacher.

Facilitators usually use focus group discussion technique (FGD) in bringing home to the participants the learning tasks which the radio teacher has presented from the radio house. One good advantage of the use of radio circle as a blended open distance learning system is that every member of the group listens to the radio broadcast. The communication medium is however, for the purposes of this work is usually in a chosen language by all the members of the group.

For instance, if the programme is situated in Guyuk, Adamawa State, Luguda language should be used by radio teacher in programming the intervention project. Secondly, the time for airing the programme to the listeners is very important.

Reaching the Un-reached Through the Independent Study Option (ISO)

The independent study option (ISO) provides the opportunity and flexibility for both school-age and adult learners to study a wide range of compulsory optional print based distance education programme for school-age children and adult learners in the communities.

This form of distance education also provide student with supports by e-mail or phone. The independent study option also offers several courses in different local languages to suit the clientele. In the event that the participants or learner or student leaves the province to example on a temporary or permanent basis, the ISO also provides the opportunity for continuing in the program.

Reaching the Un-reached Through the Teacher Mediated Option (TMO)

Teacher Mediated Option (TMO) supports the delivery of distance learning courses or programmes, especially non-formal education programmes that are scheduled within the school day or evening or weekend programmes and use a variety of technologies to assist students/learners including: instruction twice a school cycle for 40 minutes per class by audio conferencing, recording of classes as required for use up to five days after the class has occurred, and corresponding with an instructor between classes by e-mail or phone. These courses are only available to students attending school or an adult learning centre (Gold & Maitland, 1999).

Using Mobile Phone to Reach the Un-reached

The introduction of mobile phone technology has enhanced lifelong learning opportunities. Through the use of mobile phones learners in the rural areas could be reached through sending of audio messages and voicemails to learners. These messages are sent to members of the learner-group based on the topics boardening on lives skills in the real social context of the learners. The non-formal education topics may boarder around farming, feed management, and marketing management.

Every day three to five messages could be sent to participants in the programme through the mobile phones. The material developed to suit the learning needs of participants should be integrated with indigenous knowledge and contextualized to suit the local culture and local dialects (Ansari, 2010). The participating members should be usually trained in developing multimedia photography and power point. The materials thus produced, should be evaluated and then channeled though the mobile phones. The other video-based multi-media materials are shown during monthly meetings and are being telecast through local statelite channels that are run by non formal education specialist.

Learners are encouraged to discuss the learning content issues with one another using mobile phones. Once a week, participants are expected to meet and share their

experiences. The horizontal and vertical transfer of knowledge is usually expected to encourage self-directed learning among members (Tenhunen, 2008).

Self-directed learning is an important antecedent for lifelong learning. Non-formal educators believe that in addition to vertical flows of information, the horizontal transfer of knowledge is an essential dimension of such learning. Through a horizontal transfer of knowledge, the initiative has focused on evolving a social learning capital. As Bruegel (2005:5) points out:

Social capital develops from collective experience and on that basis can be transformative, realizing forms collective agency. Just as physical capital is transformed and financial capital is accumulated as it is utilized, so social capital can be characterized as a process in which alternative values and goals may be developed and the power to effect change may be accumulated, depending on the wider context and circumstances.

Hence, in the initiative structural conditions are created to facilitate the horizontal transfer of knowledge through mobile phones.

Conclusion

The emerging technologies such as mobile phones have received limited attention particularly in the context of non-formal distance learning. Numerous studies have highlighted the gender bias of technology use. The whole idea of distance learning is to make education accessible to many individuals irrespective of place and time barriers. Such ideology enhances globalization of education and the universalization of access to education to all citizenry, both youth and adults, especially, reaching the un-reached through provision of non-formal distance learning programmes.

Recommendations

It is here recommended that:

- i. Government should try to make education accessible to all and sundry in Nigeria.
- ii. Make education accessible through distance education programmes.
- iii. Establish non-formal education centres, especially in the rural areas through distance education programmes.

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