
**LEARNERS' SUPPORT SERVICES AND OPEN EDUCATION
RESOURCES IN AFRICA.**

JOY OBIAGELI NWOKOLO-OJO, Ph.D

*Department of Vocational and Technical Education,
Faculty of Education,
Benue State University,
Makurdi.*

CHRISTOPHER IGWE, Ph.D

*Department of Industrial Technology Education,
School of Science and Technology Education,
Federal University of Technology,
Minna.*

and

SUOBERE T. PUYATE, Ph.D

*Department of Science and Technology Education,
River State University of Science Technology,
Port- Harcourt.*

Abstract

Learner Support is a broad concept and can be viewed from different angles. Some researchers consider resources and interactively as critical in defining learners support whereas others put more emphasis on individualization or customization of services. Learner support has developed within open distance learning and it is this technical meaning that this study conceptualizes. It also describes the types of learner support services that can effectively address learning challenges and complement the mass production of materials which make up the elements in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Most of the course units, radio programmes, computer programmes, television and so on which replace lecture method as a means of instructional delivery, support students in central ways. Learner support services

are therefore, a wide range of services that are developed to assist students to meet their learning objectives and to gain the knowledge and skills to be successful in their studies. They are therefore, part of the open educational resources but with greater emphasis on services.

Learner support is conceptualised as an arena within which transformations in the nature and in the scale of activities made feasible by online teaching are generating widespread change in pedagogics and learning communities and access institutions as a whole in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) (Thorpe, 2001). It is also seen as integral and critical for the delivery of a quality ODL system. (Brindley, 1995; Tait, 2000; Lentell, 2003). Brindley (2004) says that student or learner support can be defined in different ways in the distance and online learning literature. It covers learning materials, teaching and tutoring and non-academic elements, administrative aspects and guidance and counseling. In this study, learner support refers to all kinds of services, including face-to-face teaching or tutoring. McKay and Makhanya (2008) define learner support as a programme within the dominant institution aiming at reducing the distance between teaching and learning whereby the distance learner receives information and make his response through face-to-face dialogical intervention. It (learner support) has frequently been identified as of particular importance for student's success.

Tait (2000) describes the central functions of learning support services for students in distance education setting as cognitive, effective and systemic. Most descriptions of learner support services focus on systemic characteristics – access to the administrative processes and procedures of the educational provider in a timely and accurate manner. What is often ignored however, is the cognitive function of learner support services, such as guidance, counseling, assessment, coaching and so on. A focus on cognitive outcomes – in particular that learners have various needs including the need to belonging, to interact with each other and to be a part of a community – leads to creating a learner support services program where students feel at home, where they feel valued and which they find manageable (Maerlow, 1987; Tait, 2000; Stacey, 2009; Vygotsky, 2009).

This type of support requires three interrelated elements (Thorpe, 2001). They are identity, individualization and interpersonal interaction.

Identity-the learner has the opportunity to interact with learner support services personnel on a one-to-one basis.

Individualization – The interaction that the learner has with learner support services personnel is individualized based on the specific needs and goals of the learner.

Interpersonal Interaction – The interaction is mutual and reciprocal with learning and performance as goals rather than simple information delivery. (Thorpe, 2001).

Learner Support Services, if focused on the cognitive features, can serve to assist performance by promoting a potential for success in a distance learning setting founded on interaction between learners and support services personnel. Pelincsar (2008) says learner support services involve providing learners with more structure during the early stages of a learning activity and gradually turning responsibility over to them as they internalize and master the skills needed to engage in higher cognitive functioning. When determining the types of learner support services, distance learning may need, the following characteristics should be considered:

Provision of structure;

Functioning as a tool;

Extension of range of the learner;

Allowing the learner to accomplish a task that would otherwise not be possible;

Helping to ensure learner's success;

Motivating the learner;

Reducing learner's frustration; and

This paper describes how the learner support services program uses a collaborative context such as learning communities, advising and other levels of interactions to address challenges of lack of needed self-directed learning skills. It also examines open education resources and determining the areas of linkage and interaction between the two concepts.

Specific Tools

Learner Support Services start with making sure that there is an appropriate fit between the students' learning and professional goals and current capabilities with the offering and structure of the educational provider's online programs. The interaction with potential students not only helps them to connect with the learning community, but the diagnostic activities help them to reflect on their learning goals and strategies, a process important to self-directed learning (Ojebode, 2009). Recruitment practices can have a big impact on a student ability to self-assess whether there is a fit, and for the education provider to do the same. On a more pertinent note, learners in their distance delivered degree programs need to possess a high level of self-direction and interest in connecting with other learners if they are to be successful. The specific tools that can be used to determine a learner's fit in an institution include intake interview, self-assessment, diagnostic pre-assessment and learning orientation questionnaire.

For instance, counselors and other learning support services personnel must be highly skilled on how to assist learners to identify their several learning needs, their desired

goals, their current competencies, so as to identify their knowledge gap and therefore, strategize on how to address the gap through instructional opportunities. In the course of the interview, the counselor must as matter of expectations regard the personal and professional commitment needed to succeed (Ludwig-Hardman, 2010). The interview questions must be structured to encourage the learner to articulate their individual needs and goals and with the help of the counselor, assess whether it is a good fit.

In the area of self-assessment, learners should be required to complete a self-assessment of their competencies through prior work and educational experiences. Using a web-enabled survey, learners should be asked to rank their level of competence from zero to three against the competency statements or learning objectives for the degree program. The self-assessment also instructs the learner to identify strengths, areas for improvement, short-and-long-term goals, and preferred methods of communication.

In the diagnostic pre-assessment, students are required to complete a web-delivered pre-assessment of their competencies in relation to the requirements of the program. The pre-assessment can also be used as an advisory tool to identify the learner's strengths and areas for improvement (Dunlap, 2012).

Learning Orientation Questionnaire is an online survey that identifies a learner's orientation to learn by looking at three psychological factors that influence learning and performance (Ubege, 2011). These factors are (1) the strategic self-directedness; (2) the independence autonomy; (3) the learner's emotional investment in learning and performance, all of which are very relevant for effective self-directed learning. The factors are all successful learning attributes. Learning orientations emphasise the dominant power of emotions and intentions in learning. It also characterizes how individuals differ in the ways they choose to plan, set, perform, and attain goals, intend to, commit and expand effort, and subsequently experience learning and achievement (Martinez, 2000).

Online Learning Experience: Need for Orientation

An orientation program is no doubt an educational provider's first opportunity to build a community with learners who have actually committed to pursuing their educational goals. It provides direction and support for new learners who may be uncomfortable in the distance learning environment, (Krauth and Carbajal, 2009). As learners begin to show a higher level of comfort with, and interaction in, the environment, the orientation facilitator should encourage learners to take greater responsibility for course content by leading discussions and providing peer feedback. An orientation should give students a sense of what it is like to be a distance or online learner; define technical requirements and prerequisite skills; offer tips for being successful in an online learning environment; describe the steps to access online courses – preferably providing opportunities to practice, accessing and navigating through a course (Rajah, 2009).

One-on-One Access to Advisors

There is basically no doubt that advising can play significant role in building the distance learner's confidence, and developing this ability to successfully fulfill his educational goals. (Hezel and Dirp, 2009). A critical learner support service is the provision of one-on-one access to advisors who supports learners by helping them identify human and material resources for learning, choose and implement learning strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes. Learners may receive ongoing assistance in such areas as planning academic programs, solving instructional problems, coping with the distance education process, and building skills for career advancement and job hunting (Carbajal, 2009).

Advisors work on one-on-one with students. They also provide individualized guidance to learners in dealing with concerns that influence their pursuit of personal and learning goals at a distance, and their ability to be more self-directed in their learning (Ukadike, 2010). Advisors could provide the highest level of structure at the beginning of a learner's program through the development of an individualized, detailed Academic Action Plan. They could in fact, utilize the items gathered during the admission process-data from the intake interview, self-assessment, diagnostic pre-assessment, and learning Orientation Questionnaire – to develop the Academic Action Plan that provides a roadmap for the learner's academic program, including information about learning resources and assessment dates (Amon, 1999).

Advisors or mentors could provide various levels of encouragements or advises to the learners. They could:

Guide learners as they progress toward established goals and encourage them to evaluate their own progress;

Advise learners on the exploration and selection of learning opportunities that will meet their needs during the initial development of their learning plans. Learners will later take greater opportunities for identifying their learning resources;

Encourage learners to articulate their learning goals and plans. In the beginning, learners need help developing their learning plan and establishing short-term goals so that they gain the skills necessary to manage their goals and plans later in their programs; and

Help learners understand their learning orientations, strengths, and areas for improvement early in their programs so that they can use this information to develop their plans, goals, and assessment of their learning progress.

Community of Learners

Social learning experiences, such as peer teaching, group projects, debates, discussion, and other activities that promote knowledge construction in a social context, allow learners to observe and subsequently emulate other students' model of successful learning (Wenger, 2008). Successful self-directed learners appear to be highly aware of context in the sense of placing their learning within a social setting in which advice, information and the skill modeling provided by other learners is crucial conditions for self-directed learning (Brookfield, 2008).

The crucial component of successful program is social interaction. It encourages the development of online learning communities, which are groups of people, connected via technology-mediated communication, and actively engage one another in collaborative learner-centered activities to intentionally foster the creation of knowledge. It also shares a number of values and practices, including diversity, mutual appropriation, and progressive discourse. A sense of community cannot be promoted by simply requiring learner interaction in asynchronous environment (Lowell and Persichitte, 2000). By focusing on the nature and quality of interactions can lead to community development. Learners could be introduced to the tools and skills required to actively participate in the community during the orientation course. Most of them would therefore, be comfortable with the technology and would need support to access the community itself. New learners are introduced to the community and are provided with detailed instructions on how to access resources, navigate the community, and communicate with other learners through threaded discussions and online clients that are also organized by the mentors around specific topic areas. (Long, 2008).

Through authentic sharing between learners and instructors, students have the opportunities to interact on the content and skills being learned and also on topics such as (a) different learning and management approaches and strategies, (b) professional and career goals and opportunities, (c) personal interests, (d) resources and references that are particularly helpful. The interaction can foster learner competencies, such as self-directed learning skills because it creates a positive psychological climate built upon trusting human relationships. The interaction is also such that keeps learners actively connected to the learning environment and education provider (Knowles, 2009).

Open Education Resources

This are freely accessible, openly licensed documents and media that are useful for teaching, learning and assessing as well as for research purposes. Although, some people consider the use of an open file format to be an essential characteristic of Open Educational Resources (OER), it is not an acknowledged requirement all over the world. The development and promotion of open educational resources is often motivated by a desire to curb the commodification of knowledge and provide an

alternate or enhanced educational paradigm (Bissell, 2007). UNESCO is taking a leading role in making countries aware of the potentials of OER. The organization has instigated debate on how to apply OERs in practice and chaired vivid discussion on this matter through its International Institute of Educational Planning (IIEP). Believing that OERs can widen access to quality education, particularly when shared by many countries and higher education institutions, UNESCO also champions OERs as a means of promoting access, equity and quality in the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Recently, the 2012 Paris OER Declaration was approved during the 2012 OER World Congress held in UNESCO Headquarters (Magyar, 2004).

In its simplest form, the concept of Open Education resources (OER) describes any educational resources (including curriculum maps, course materials, textbooks, streaming videos, multimedia applications, podcasts, and any other materials that have been designed for use in teaching and learning) that are openly available for use by educators and students, without an accompanying need to pay royalties or license fees (Bethan, 2010). The term is largely synonymous with another term, Open Course Ware (OCW), although the latter may be used to refer to a specific, more structured subject of OER. However, OER has emerged as a concept with great potential to support educational transformation (Reche, 2009). While its educational value lies in the idea of using resources as an integral method of communication of curriculum in educational courses (i.e. resource-based learning), its transformative power lies in the ease with which such resources, when digitalized, can be shared via the internet (Anderson, 2011). An OER is therefore, an educational resource that incorporates a license that facilitates reuse, and potentially adaptation, without first requesting permission from the copyright holder (Ibid).

It is very important to note that a lot of e-learning courses may harness open educational resources, but this does not mean that OERs are necessarily e-learning. Many open resources being produced currently-while shareable in a digital format-are also printable. Given the bandwidth and connectivity challenges common in some developing countries, it would be expected that a high percentage of resources of relevance to higher education in such countries are shared as printable resources, rather than being designed for use in e-learning (Magyar, 2004).

Although the use of OER can support open learning / open education, the two are not the same. Making open education or open learning a priority has significantly bigger implications than only committing to releasing resources as open or using OER in educational programmes. It requires systematic analysis of assessment and accreditation systems, student support, curriculum frameworks, mechanisms to recognize prior learning, and so on, in order to determine the extent to which they enhance or impede openness (Bayer, 2005). It (open education resources) might give practical expression to some of the principles of open learning, which include:

Learning process should centre on the learners, build on their experience and encourage independent and critical thinking;

Learning provision should be flexible so that learners can increasingly choose, where, when, what and how they learn, as well as the pace at which they will learn;

Prior learning, prior experience and demonstrated competencies should be recognised so that learners are not unnecessarily barred from educational opportunities by lack of appropriate qualifications (Bunnett, 2002).

There has been significant emphasis placed in OER discussions on the quality of OER. This makes the concept of resource-based learning of particular interest. Despite this, debates over OER have typically made little reference to the concept of resource-based learning until recently. This may be because the emphasis in most global OER discussion has been on the sharing and licensing of existing materials, a significant proportion of which has included simply sharing lecture notes and power point presentations used in face-to-face lecture (Stacy, 2009). However, many OERs available online today have not explicitly been designed as part of a deliberate strategy to shift to resource-based learning. Nevertheless, linking OERs and resource-based learning provides an opportunity to leverage both most effectively (Long, 2008).

Clear-cut Nexus between Learner Support Services and Open Educational Resources

Learner Support Services are conceptualised as different learning materials, teaching and tutoring and non-academic elements, administrative aspects and guidance and counseling. Through the use of high – tough, high – interaction Learner Support strategies – such as connection to a community of learners and the other scaffolding techniques – online students feel less isolated and are immersed in an environment that supports them as they develop or enhance their self-directed learning skills. Learner support services also refer to all kinds of services, including face – to – face teaching and tutoring. It is defined by Mckay and Makhauya (2008) as “a programme within the dominant institution aiming at reducing the distance between teaching and learning whereby the distance learner receives face – to – face dialogical intervention”. It indeed involves providing learners with more structure during the early stages of a learning activity and gradually turning responsibility over to them as they internalize and master the skills needed to engage in higher cognitive functioning.

While learning support services place emphasis on all kinds of services, including tutoring, face – to – face teaching and dialogue, learner’s self – assessment, learner’s diagnostic pre-assessment, and so on, Open Education Resources (OERs) emphasis on educational resources, such as course materials, textbooks, multimedia applications, podcasts, videos, computers, and so on, that can be used to enhance instruction, and therefore, improve the quality of teaching and learning. Basically, the

two concepts are aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning. But there is no direct relationship between OER and Learner Support Service. Many OER available online have not explicitly been designed as part of a deliberate strategy to shift to Learner Support Services (LSS). However, the LSS could be dubbed as learner strategies aimed at enhancing the performance of students in their respective courses, and therefore, achieve their study goals. LSS is needed for four basic reasons:

Some people haven't studied for a while and need to 'brush up' on their skills, especially maths and reading to find information;

It can make it a lot harder when students have to deal with literacy and numeracy problems when they also have a lot of course contents to work through;

Some course units are harder than others; and Some students may not have learnt some of the required maths concepts and reading techniques when they were at school. (Shuaibu, 2013).

Both concepts also assist students to receive the best training, successfully complete their courses and learn as much as possible during their studies.

Conclusion/Recommendations

Open educational resources and Learner Support Services are two different concepts that have been used to improve teaching and learning in several institutions of learning across the globe. Education is a social investment, and should be protected as such if it is truly to fulfill its potential in creating a more equal world. This makes it critical to find practical ways to build several educational models that will ensure the success of the online educational programs. Today, the potentials of OER include bringing transparency to educational processes, establishing a new economic model for processing and publishing learning materials, and facilitating collaborations between teachers and students at different institutions. However, successful OER initiatives will be those that immediately add educational value within the current ICT infrastructure constraints of any participating institutions in the world.

Learner Support Services, on the other hand, can enhance teaching and learning when appropriately "designed" for that purpose. They can also effectively address learning challenges, and complement the mass production of materials which make up the elements in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). The two concepts therefore, have similar focus – engendering effective teaching and learning. The only difference observed among the two concepts is in the tools and methodologies of application. It is therefore, recommended that the value of OER projects and initiatives should be measured, in practical terms, against the extent to which they advance core educational objectives, and the principles of operation that govern OER communities should be driven by this imperative, rather than by dogma.

Secondly, in this era of versatility of technology, learner Support Services should extend beyond guidance and counseling, adoption of non-academic elements, teaching and tutoring, to encompass, on a rebust note, the use of ICT facilities such as computers. In fact, digital cameras, projectors and a wide range of software applications, laptop and wireless networks, and so on provide more flexible opportunities for students to apply and develop their ICT capability.

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