Online Education and Competence development: Why Online Education May not Provide for the Competence Development of Adult Learners?

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Abstract

Online education has become the order of the day for delivering higher education by transcending temporal and spatial barriers. Despite its appropriateness in reaching distance learners, there are still issues in relation to the effectiveness of online education in developing the competence of adult learners. This paper makes a review of the literature in the area with aim of informing actors the possibilities whereby online education may fail to deliver its promise. Seen from a pedagogical point of view, the paper concludes that although online education is successful in addressing the physical distance between learners and instructors and among learners themselves, there is evidence that it has not been successful in breaking the psychological and social distance among participants. It is suggested that initial and intermittent f2f contact is arranged for; cyber literacy and related experiences of learners considered, and candid assessment of the leaning needs of online learners be made before implementing online education.

Key words: Online education, E-Learning, distance education, open learning, Competence development, Virtual learning

1. Introduction

[1]Online learning (e-learning) is gaining wide acceptance in the education policy discourse all over the world. Several factors, both at macro and micro levels, are said to have contributed to such developments. At the macro level, for instance, higher education systems need to address increasing demand for education through diversification of their mode of delivery of which online education is one such an option. Furthermore, higher education systems are positioned to take the opportunity of market demand for their services, and the available technological breakthroughs such as the Internet. Hence, cost effectiveness, accessibility, and market demand are assumed to be the underlying rationales for the suppliers of online education. Likewise, at the

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[1] Online learning and e-learning are used interchangeably in this paper.

micro levels, individuals' decision to enroll in online education[2] is based on the fact that such provisions are accessible irrespective of geographic barriers- at home and at workplaces. Pedagogically, online learning is flexible, and learner centered so that learners can get learning experience at their own pace, and convenience. It is appealing because of its association with the modern technology such as the Internet which has managed to affect people's everyday life. The purpose of this paper is, therefore to explore why online learning may not be effective in the development of adult learners' competence. It focuses particularly on the pedagogy of online learning such as the development of online community of learners, interactions among members and the facilitations of such interactions.

Statement of the research problem

Although online education, as a means for designing and delivering lifelong learning, is appealing to many stakeholders, evidences show the presence of some issues that require due attention. On the positive note, "advocates maintain that online learning can cut delivery costs, widen student access and improve the quality of materials" (Mason, 2006:6), yet others think that online learning has not contributed sufficiently to competence development of its attendants. For instance, Gunasekaran, McNeil and Shaul(2002:2)argue that "E-and distance learning success is a mixed bag. Technology has eclipsed the ability and motivation of institutions to support it. Many adopters have failed. The marketplace still demands traditional methods of delivery of instruction." Similarly, Bates (2001:117) adds that "E-learning is not the answer to many of the most pressing problems faced particularly by poor developing nations". This trend of dissatisfaction with online education is further marked by the adoption of blended approach for its pedagogical advantages over the complete substitute of f2f approach.

Proponents and experts in the area have provided conditions under which online education program can be effective and deliver its promise. Then, the question will be why "the good practices" advocated for effective online education failed to work in some situations and did not contribute to learners' competence development? In line with this, Mason and Lefrere(2003) (cited in Gunga and Ricketters, 2007:3) have argued that "While promising practices are worthy

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[2] Online education is a means of course delivery seen from suppliers' perspective while online learning is from learners' perspective.

of consideration, the concept of something promising is semantically loaded towards unproven methodologies". The author of this paper, therefore, aims at reflecting on those factors that obscure the potential advantages of online learning and attempts to bring into light the complexities surrounding the designing and implementing of it.

1.1 Data and Methodology

Secondary data from the literature and research findings were used to investigate the question although primary data from attendants of online learning seems to provide more generous insights. Most importantly, empirical research findings on teaching and learning in an online environment were the main sources of information for this study. These findings were analyzed against the assumption of effective online learning to address the question.

Scope of the Study

Although it is argued that both technology and pedagogy are relevant for the effectiveness of online learning, this investigation is focused on pedagogical aspect of online education because "the technology used in an online program is not as important as other instructional factors such as pedagogy and course design" (Phipps and Merisotis(1999) cited in Johnson and Aragon (2003:2). The investigation considered adult learners perusing entirely online education as part time learners while working full time or having other social commitments under varied circumstances. It is approached from learners' perspective although technology, institutional policy and leadership play a significant role for effectiveness online education (Menchaca and Bekele, 2008).

1.2   Analytical framework

This study is informed by social constructivist theory of learning, which considers learners as active learning community in a given context (Vygosty cited in La Pointe and resister, 2008). Proponents of constructivist pedagogy argue that "learners construct their own meaning in response to sensory imputes from authentic experience" (Pool, 2000 cited in Brown and King, 2000:1). Constructivism as a philosophy of learning can be defined as meaning making rooted in the context of the situation as individuals "construct their meaning of and give meaning to external world as product" (Brown and King, 2000:1). This conceptualization highlights the importance of individuals' active roles, contexts, interactions with context as shaping the

meaning making process- learning. Evident in the above statements is the creation of active learning community or learning environments, which is characterized by collaboration among learners, availability of rich context that provides for substantive aspect of interaction (information), and guidance for such collaborative efforts. In line with this, Wilson (1996) cited in Brown and King (2000:2) argues that constructivist learning environment is "a place where learners may work together and support each other as they use a variety of tools and information resources in their guided pursuit of learning goals". Wilson's description clearly indicates that learning process consists of learners, their interactions with each other, information in the learners' environment, technologies that help avail this information, and guidance to make sense out of their interactions. Hence, constructivist learning theory can serve as an underlying analytical tool to conceptualization how effective learning occurs in an online learning context.

Informed by constructivist theory of learning, a more practical framework developed by Collis and Davies (1995) cited in Yoon (2003) was used to frame and guide the investigation. Yoon (2003) convincingly argues that the learning outcomes of online education cannot be fairly judged without looking at the various aspects of products, services, and interactions that online learning provides in more concrete terms. Collis and Davies (1995) cited in Yoon (2003:4) argue that "effective online education is the result of a blend of technology, pedagogy and organizational support." This model or framework provides clear and comprehensive frame of reference to conceptualize and investigate effectiveness of online education program.

The framework consists of three components. Firstly, pedagogy refers to aligning the learning goals with learning approaches with the aim of managing interactions. Accordingly, Moore (1989) cited in Yoon (2003:8) identifies three types of interactions- learner- instructor, learner-context and learner-learner". Secondly, as learners' interaction with technologies remains an important dimension of online interactions, varied technologies need to be in place. These technologies include "print, pre-recorded video and audio, discussion groups, live virtual classes, text based chat, simulations, online references, streamed audio and video, e-mail, and learning management systems" (Yoon, 2003:8). Finally, Organizational support includes institutional support, interaction with faculty, feedback quality, meaningful contents, course structure, student

support, faculty support, evaluation and assessment (Phipps & Merisotis (2000) cited in Yoon (2003)).

2. Analysis

2.1   Why online learning?

In this section I attempted to shed light on some of assumptions underlying the development and use of online education. It sets the background against which the following discussion will be based. It focuses on why institutions embark on online education? What are the pedagogical justifications in favor of this mode of delivery over the traditional one? The prevalence of online education has justifications from institutional policy makers, individual adult learners and instructional thinkers. The justifications posed by each of these parties are highlighted below.

From the supply side, institutions, mostly higher education, take this mode of delivery not only as a means to react to wave of changes threatening them but also as an opportunity to take advantages of such changes. Demographic changes, increased demand for knowledge, financial constraints and the flourishing of information communication technology (ICT) have created both challenges and opportunities. These institutions have to respond to such changes by devising innovative modes of delivery which includes e-learning among other things. Alongside these challenges posed by increased demand for knowledge by individuals and society, the current wave of change has also presented potential opportunity for e-learning to flourish. For instance, Mason (2006) remarks that the unprecedented growth of ICT motivates institutional policy makers to embark on a mode of delivery that extends beyond traditional on campus one to provide for lifelong learning. This helps, according to advocates, institutions cut delivery costs, widen student access and improve quality of learning (Mason, 2006:6)

From the demand side, online education is justified for its convenience in reaching seemingly unreachable learners. It avoids the barriers of time and space to adult learners as they can access online education easily in relative terms. More and more non traditional students (adult learners) are interested in lifelong learning opportunities that suit their lives-working and learning-as the labour market goes more unpredictable than ever before. This unpredictable labour market also shifted the responsibility of learning away from the employers to workers. In line with this,

Mason (2006:8) argues that the unpredictability of the labour market shifted "the responsibility for training, retraining updating re-skilling away from the employer to employees."

Finally, in addition to its cost effectiveness and accessibility for adult learners that cannot make to traditional, on campus and face to face one, online education is promoted for its assumed pedagogical advantages. It is assumed that online education would remove some disadvantages of traditional, one-way distance learning by allowing a two-way communication. E-Learning allows flexibility, learner-centered teaching and focuses on learning process instead of content of learning. It is argued that these features augment the quality of learning- hence competence development by adult learners. Flexibility is advocated for e-learning for it enables learners to access the learning materials at their chosen time, place and pace. In line with this, Mason (2006) argues that the new technology places control of learning process in the hands of the learners. This last justification leads this discussion of pedagogical rationales upon which online learning is based community of learning.

2.2 Is online education good or bad for adult learners?

According to the social constructivist learning theory online education has huge potential to help adult learners develop their competences as revealed in the literature. Although it may not be manageable to present all the studies that documented success stories of online education, some illustrative cases can be used as a guide to "good practice" in designing and implementing online education. Three studies that I reviewed showed that course design, instructor facilitation, and discussion among participants are milestones for the success of online education. First, Swan (2001) made empirical study on design factors are affecting perceived learning and found that the clarity of design in addition to interaction with instructors and active discussion among course participants has significantly influenced perceived learning. She further reviewed the literature and suggested some design principles like.

- Instructors acting s facilitators
- Use of a variety presentation styles
- Learner control of pacing
- Clear feedback

- Consistent layout
- Clear navigation

Although Swan's (2001) study has focused on design factors, practically design factors do relate to the other two components: interaction with instructors and peer discussion among participants. Hence, an instructor who interacts frequently and constructively with learners can help them develop competences.

Secondly, LaPointe and Reiesetter (2008) have studied the efficacy of online learning community by comparing with the f2f one and suggested some ways to maximize learners online peer connections. Even if they underline the importance of accessibility expertise, and caring conveyed by online instructor for leaner-instructor interaction, factors affecting learner-learner interaction are less clear.

Finally, Dennen, Darabi, and Smith(2007) studied the importance of particular instructor's action and concluded that those instructors that maintain frequency of contact; have a regular presence in class discussion space; and make expectation clear to learners are contributing to online learning success. Despite these guides on "good practice" for designing and implementing online education effectively, there are still loopholes worth further investigation. Any discussion on the contribution of online education for competence development should not be considered as yes or no argument but rather as a reflection one the extent to which the potentials of the new technology could have been tapped hence, the focus of this paper is to reflect on the gap between the rhetoric and the realities of designing and implementing online education for adult learners.

2.3 Building and maintaining sense of community for online learning

According to Collis and Davis (1995) cited in Yoon (2003) technology, pedagogy and institutional support are important components for effective online learning. However, this part the paper is focused on the pedagogy of online learning. Particularly, it discusses the challenges associated with building and maintaining community of learning and the perceived value of online learning community. It addresses problems associated with developing, maintaining, and effectively using of sense of community for online based on research evidences.

Community of learning heavily draws on the social constructivist theory of learning. It is analogues to group of learners in a classroom in traditional face-to –face f2f instruction. Community refers to group of people that have some shared concerns, interests and goals. Conrad defines sense of community as "a general sense of connection, belonging, and comfort that develop over time among members of a group who share purpose or commitment to a common goal" (2005:2). Drawing on the social learning theories, researchers emphasize the importance of community in an online learning environment. For instance, Gunawardena and colleagues (1998) cited in Wallace (2003:8) have developed a model of how learning occurs, which includes the following phases.

1. Sharing and comparing of information;
2. discovery and exploration of dissonance or inconsistency among ideas, concepts;
3. negotiation of meaning/co –construction of knowledge;
4. testing and modification of proposed synthesis or co-construction; and
5. agreement statement(s)/ application of newly constructed meaning

This model presupposes the creation and maintenance of sense of community among online learners. However, the difference between the ideal and actual working of community of learning relates to the challenge of creating such a community. Who creates a community? Learners or online tutors? Although all have considerable stake in its development, sense of community emerges from sustained association, connections and mutual trust over time. The available research findings reveal the presence of significant challenges in developing, maintaining and utilizing community of learners to enhance online learning.

First, the initial creation of community of learning is more demanding than it might be thought of. For instance, Conrad (2005) made an empirical longitudinal study investigating how a sense of community is developed and maintained and found that learners who had a chance to meet each other face-to-face had better able to maintain sense of community than those who never met. This finding clearly shows that face-to-face meeting of online learners is one of the preconditions to develop a sense of community. It can be argued that a sense of community is more related to the affective consideration than technical consideration. Online learning could be successful in eliminating the physical barriers but not the social barriers. The question should be to what extent online environment replicates the dynamics of f2f classes whereby sense of

belongingness developed not only during classes but also in extra curricula activities. The fact that learners have common goals and concerns does not necessarily lead to the creation of sense of community. Hence, under circumstances when it is not possible for learners to meet in person, it is unlikely for them to develop sense of community. And this fails the very assumption of online learning and makes it ineffective in some way. The promotion of blended approach to online learning is one of the indicators of the inherent weakness of online learning community.

Secondly, the sense of community among online learners is difficult to sustain even after initial f2f contacts. For instance, Haythorathwaite (2000) cited in Wallace (2003:25) concludes that "although a community was formed in f2f segments of the study, maintaining the community was harder in the online segments of the class than in the f2f portions". This suggests that as learners go online; their sense of community goes away. It seems that the sense of connectedness-that is missing in an online environment- presence of social and psychological distance are said to have weakened this ensue of community (Ravai cited in Wallace, 2003). It can be argued that the loss of humanity and consequent learners' isolation may not be compensated by advanced technologies that overturn physical distance. On the contrary, the presence of these social and psychological cues in traditional f2f makes it possible for the development of sense of community. Hence, the sense of community among online learners seems to be more fragile than might be espoused by promoters of online learning

Finally, is the learning community worth maintaining? The sense of community is a means to another end, namely learning. Even when it is built; the contribution of online learning community for facilitating learning is doubted by some online learners. For instance, LaPointe and Reisetter (2008) studied the perception of online learners towards the value and efficacy of online community and found that learners perceived online learning community as superfluous and inconvenient, and not supportive of their online learning process. It could be argued that learners' background could hamper the effective use of online community. Online learners are mostly part time learners and fulltime attendants of other responsibilities like working, taking care of families, and participating in other activities. This varied social context would not allow for synchronous online interaction and makes asynchronous virtual classes the only feasible option. However asynchronous discussions are less powerful than synchronous ones because of

the time interval between attendants' postings, comments and critics in the former. In line with this, it is argued that asynchronous channels are less capable to create social presence of participants. Similarly, Thomas (2002) cited in Wallace (2003) argues that the usual asynchronous threaded structure of online discussion forums does not support knowledge-building instructions." The difficulty of maintaining synchronous virtual classes could fail the success of community of online learners.

Interaction and the learning community

Interaction is used to understand how learners construct knowledge in an online learning environment. Seen from a social constructivist theory of learning, online interaction enables learners experience the insights of others and facilitate the change of perspective and meaning of learning experience. Rooted in collaborative community of learners, interaction is the main route to effective learning. For instance, Yoon (2003:3) argues that "learning should emerge from students interactions with meaningful contents, the course instructors and peers." Then, learner-learner, learner-instructor, and learner-content interactions determine the effectiveness of online community and the learning of its members. The following paragraphs reflect on these types of interactions.

To begin with, educators assume that learner-learner interactions prevail or should prevail over learner-instructor ones and lead to effective learning. This assumption is made on the basis of new a paradigm of learning-learner-centered whereby learners will be responsible for their own learning and instructors act as facilitators. Particularly, the social learning theory places the locus of learning in the learners' ability to interact within the community and construct meanings socially. There is contradicting evidence if online learning fulfils this promise. For instance, La Pointe and Reisetter (2008:7) studied the perception of learners about efficacy of such interactions and found that online learners experienced significantly "more interaction with their online instructors than they did with their online peers."

This trend clearly indicates that there is a gap between the assumptions of how *online learning community operates and actual learners' preferences*. Even when learner-learner interactions prevail, the depth of such interactions and its learning values are questionable. Does it lead to meaningful learning? Wallace (2003) observes that learners rarely move beyond sharing of

information and clarification of technical matters. If learners are not able to negotiate with their peers to change their own insights and not be able to create a new meaning, the effectiveness of online learning will be defeated. This is so because access to information does not guarantee learning although it could be necessary condition. In line with this, Tallent- Runnels et al. (2000) cited in Lapointe and Reisetter (2008) speak of their fear that "online interactions have been shown to be more perfunctory than in depth" and these exchanges conclude before learners have achieved higher level of processing.

Why learner-learner interactions are of limited depth and learner-instructor interactions are so prevalent? First it can be argued that learners attach lesser value to learner-learner interactions than their interactions with instructors despite the assumptions held by educators. These could be explained by the fact that today's attendants of online learning had once enjoyed f2f instructions and probably depended on their instructors' expertise. As a consequence of these prior experiences they might attach greater value to learner- instructor interactions. Secondly, unlike young people, adult online learners have formed their perspectives and experiences which form the basis for their identities. Even though it is not impossible to change perspectives, it could be more challenging than thought to be. For instance, Kanuka and Aderson (1998) cited in Wallace (2003) alternatively hypothesize that" it is much easier to ignore or not to respond to online messages that are incompatible with existing knowledge than it is in a face-to – face environment…." This hints at the possibility that online learners prefer independent learning to collaborative one advocated by social constructivist learning theorists. This questions the effectiveness of online learning community and the peer dialogue and collaboration it allows.

Similarly, Youngblood, Trede and DiCorpo (2001) have studied what instructors and learners actually do in an online learning environment and the expectations and learners' preferences of instructors' tasks. They found that learners preferred instructors' tasks such as clarifying expectations, assessment systems for online discussions but showed lesser interest in instructors' role of facilitating critical thinking, monitoring participation and promoting learner-learner interactions. Youngblood, Trede and DiCorp (2001) also found that instructors' facilitation roles reported to be well done in these tasks of providing clarifications, expectations and welcoming learners to discussion. This finding indicates that learners look up to their instructors for

procedural information and practical guidance mainly. And this has an implication for learning. Although clarification information on procedures for online discussion is necessary but it may not be sufficient to lead to learning that involves meaning making. Under such circumstances, online learners use surface instead of deep learning approach, according to Mimirinis and Bhattacharya (2007). Accordingly, rote learning aiming at securing certificate of completion instead of meaningful learning would prevail.

Why this happens often times? It seems that both instructors and learners fail to recognize the differences between f2f and online classes. This is evidenced as learners tend to looked up to their instructors for help and as instructors tend to think that facilitation that works well in f2f fits in with online environment. In line with this, Youngblood, Trede and DiCorp (2001) argue that instructors who try to use the f2f class facilitation method in an online environment are faced with challenge. Why challenge? It can be argued that instructors need to understand that online learning is a different context. In relation to this, the training of instructors for online facilitation seems a missing element for two reasons. First, there is a trend of belittling the value of teachers' teaching role with concomitant shift of emphasis from teaching to learning. In many cases it seems a revolution that leads to the end of the perceived "authoritarian" teacher roles that have been in place for years. The greater focus on learner and learning instead of teacher and teaching in education discourse, though defensible, could be taken to the extreme and lead to undesirable results. Secondly, most online instructors are moved from f2f or handle both responsibilities being trained as f2f instructors. For instance, Gung and Ricketts (2007) conclude that teacher education needs to be remodeled to reflect the demand of online facilitation. This will take the discussion further to the analysis of instructor facilitation, which is the subject of the following subsection

2.4 Facilitating online learning

Learner participation in an online discussion depends on many factors. Among these are online instructors' role in designing course materials, interacting with learners and providing feedback, which will be discussed in this part of the paper. It seems that there is a need to expect instructors to play facilitative role in an online learning. However, the question will be how the task is carried out?

Fist course material or instructional design is thought to relate to learners' learning achievement. For instance, Mimirinis and Bhattacharya (2007) argue that there is a relationship between higher learning outcomes and deep approach to learning, on the one hand, and between a deep approach to learning and instructional design on the other. Although there is no rule of thumb for designing instructions that lead to deep learning for online learners, often times it is important to design it in such a way that inquiry, critical thinking rooted in collaboration and communication are reflected in the design. To this effect instructional design for online learning should be based on instructional principles that best suit online learning.

There is a gap between what is actually practiced in designing instruction and the design suggested by thinkers in the area of online learning. For instance, Johnson and Aragon (2003) claim that most online learning fails because course designers think that online course is an extension of traditional f2f like: recorded lectures, online headings, homework, assignment-instead of innovative instructional strategies. They argue that innovative instructional strategies should be built on a combination of learning theories rather than being confined to one persevered perspective. They further argue that quality online learning environments should draw on behavioral learning theory, cognitive learning theory, and social learning theory. And instruction needs to be designed in such a way that it addresses individual difference among learners, among other things. Such differences could include learning styles, approaches to learning, motivation, expectation and desire.

In an online adult learning, individual differences are significant at least in their prior learning and experiences. It could be faulty to assume that all learners possess the same prior experience and have same learning needs. However, in practice, this is the case often times. For instance, study by Kirkwood (2006) showed that "there is mismatch between instructors' assumptions and learners ICT experiences and competences. It was reasoned that course designers had underestimated what their potential students were already capable of doing with ICT. This prior ICT competence is conceptualized as "cyber literacy" (Gurak cited in Meyer, 2008:3). And there is a need for instructors to design online courses based on true assessment of prior knowledge of their potential online learners. Prior learning, even when perfectly assessed, is a mixed blessing. On the positive side, it can help as building block for facilitation. On the negative side, it can

also be threatening factor according to Kanuka and Aderson (1998) cited in Wallace (2003) as it blocks openness to new and different perspectives. Designing online courses also requires aligning the learning activities with intended learning outcomes. For instance, if the outcome is to develop independent thinking and problem solving skills, individual written project work would be the appropriate design whereas if communication skill is sought, online discussion activities would be ideal. The challenge of designing course is worsened by the varieties of course and lack of teacher preparation for online facilitation as it has not found its way into teacher preparation. Related to this, pre-authentication which refers to making "learning materials and environments correspond to the real world prior to the learner's interaction with them" (Huang, 2002) poses a challenge to course designers when they have little opportunity to assess the learning needs and context of learners. This has been reported in the study of Kirkwood (2006).

Secondly, online instructors can facilitate learning by encouraging interaction in an online learning environment. Whereas instructors' role in facilitating learner content interactions is addressed by designing appropriate instruction, there is a need for instructors to facilitate learner interactions. What would be the role of instructors in learner-learner interactions? Although there is a shift of emphasis away from teaching to learning, the role of professional teaching still remains important. In understanding the new role of teachers in an online environment, Anderson and colleagues (2001) cited in Wallace (2003) have developed two constructs-teacher presence and teacher immediacy that capture the essence of online facilitation. Teacher presence refers to cognitive presence of teacher in an online learning community. It is characterized by direct instruction. This involves clarifying expectations, initiating and guiding online discussions and explaining assessment criteria (Youngblood, Trede and DiCorpo, 200 1).This facilitation attends to learners' cognitive need. Teacher's direct instruction is essential if conversation needs to progress beyond information sharing to knowledge construction, application and integration.

Teacher immediacy, however, refers to teaching behaviors that enhances closeness and non verbal interaction with learners. It is very important as a motivation factor for learners. Teacher immediacy involves the affective aspect of learning which is most valued by learners. For instance, Conrad (2005) emphatically argues that learners value more the affective

considerations than technical part of their online learning. However, unlike the geographical distance between teachers and learners, the psychosocial distance is a great challenge to overcome even with modern technology. Likewise, Moore cited in Conrad (2005:16) conceptualizes distance in an online learning "as pedagogical and social than merely physical and geographical". Teacher immediacy, as a psychological distance, must be addressed duly for effective online leaning. In relation to this, Gunga and Rickets (2007:2) remark that "if e - learning is to compete with face-to-face delivery of richness in terms of psychosocial and emotional flexibility, there is a need to enhance audio- visual and interactive capabilities of course management system to compensate for sensory and emotional loss". It can be argued that addressing multiple senses of learners through the use of online interactive technology can serve the learning needs of online learners. However, there is no substitute for the psychological loss of online instructions but there are good practices. For instance, facilitators need to be aware of the expectations and desires of learners. In line with this, study showed that there is a gap between actual facilitation need and facilitator assumptions. For instance, Dennen, Darabi and Smith (2007:14), relating learner satisfaction with motivation, have expressed some concern that "online instructors may think what students like may be other than what is good for them, they should not turn a deaf ear to what students claim to want as part of their online learning experiences- if for no other reason than to maintain learner satisfaction." In their study, Dennen, Darabi and Smith (2007) found that instructors perceived that focusing facilitation on course content and the feedback information would provide for learner satisfaction while learners have opted more for meeting their interpersonal needs. These findings clearly show that instructors were not well aware of the need of learners and made an assumption about the learners needs and acted accordingly. This could be because of two reasons. First, instructor could undermine the importance of attending learner desires and expectations for effective learning. Secondly, they might find assessing these expectations online difficult and resort to making assumptions.

Similarly, online facilitators need to have regular presence in class discussion space and respond to learner initiated communications. This practical guide is based on the new methodology of learner centered teaching approach whereby instructors need to have real assessment of and conception of learner needs and take reactive stance to inquiry by letting learners be proactive to set the agenda for interaction. However, this does not replace the missing psychological element

in human communication. Evidences show that efforts to make online discussion interactive and open may lead to learner satisfaction. Apart from learner's satisfaction, the impact of online interaction in moving learner from information to knowledge construction is rarely established. For instance, Wallace (2003:32) reviewed 100 research articles on distance and online education and concluded that "…moving students discourse from sharing and explaining to knowledge building is an elusive process in online classes." However, two points are worth attention in relation to instructor's presence and reactive position. First, regular online attendance seems infeasible as learners could be located in different time zones with facilitators. Secondly, reactive stance assumes that all learners have the capacity and motivation to reflect on their learning experiences, but this may not always be the case for all online learners. I rather suggest that both proactive and reactive approaches be used based on the assessment of their learning needs.

3. Conclusion

This paper reflected on why online learning may not help adult learners' develop competence despite its perceived value in improving access, quality, and cost effectiveness and flexibility. Data obtained from the literature and research findings were used and the following concluding remark is drawn.

It can be argued that although online learning is successful in removing the physical and geographic distance between instructors, and learners and among learners themselves, there is evidence that it has not been successful in breaking the psychological and social distance among participants. Firstly, developing and maintaining of sense of community among online learners is conditioned by frequent and/or prior face to face contact among learners. Practically, as there would be less chance for participants to meet in person before or during online learning arrangement, the maintenance of the community could be fragile and futile exercise.

Secondly, even the hardly built community of learners found to be ineffective in many respects. To begin with, as attendants are different in terms of their prior experience, including their cyber literacy, their discussions are limited to simply information exchange than deep learning that leads to meaning changing and sharing. That is to say that it provides for shallow discussions only as attendants tend to be defendants of their well established experiences and perspectives. One of reasons for this shallow discussion could be the lack of psychological relatedness need

which is rarely satisfied in an online environment. The other could be instructors' assumptions about their learners and how they can learn best. Studies show that there is a gap between adult learners learning needs, learning styles, prior knowledge and the assumptions made by their online instructors about course design, and method of facilitation. Differences in learning needs are concrete realities among the traditional learners. This would be more challenging when online instructors are dealing with adult learners who have substantially more varied needs than young people.

Despite its escalating support, as a great technological breakthrough, the effectiveness of online learning seems still elusive and under researched. For instance, Hara and Kling (2000) cited in Wallace (2003:15) convincingly argue that "… many researcher bring an optimistic, romantic view of technology that may dampen their ability to look at hard questions and apply rigorous research methods. Much of the research, they maintain, has been advocacy and theorizing about the future".

Finally, online education has potential to advance distance learning and fulfill its promise. However, there is a need for further investigation, in my view, on how can it compare with traditional f2f education in its pedagogy. First, initial and intermittent f2f contact found to contribute to develop and maintain sense of community, but how frequently this contact should be needs further exploration. Secondly, most studies focus on perceived satisfaction of learners in an online education. This variable may not necessarily indicate the learning gain as learners' satisfaction could only be good input. Finally, subject specific studies that can address how teaching and learning can be conducted for specific subjects are noteworthy.

4. Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of the study, the following suggestions are made in order to overcome the short comings of online education. Higher learning institutions intending to run online education is advised:

1) To arrange for initial and/or intermittent f2f contact among learners and between online facilitators and learners. This can help participants get know each other in person so that later online interaction can be facilitated. Shortly put, it can make up for the lost psychological and social aspect of online education.

2) To make sure that attendants of online education have got some prior experience – cyber literacy- so that they can benefit from and /or contribute online interactions, discussions.

3) Online education facilitators in charge of designing and facilitating online education need to have a candid assessment and knowledge of learner's needs, learning styles, and prior knowledge so that planned education becomes relevant for the learners.

4) In addition to these suggestions, subject specific studies that can address how teaching and learning can be conducted for specific subjects remain indispensable.

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