

EFFECTIVENESS OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING APPROACHES IN COMMUNITY BASED LEARNING FOR GIRLS AND WOMEN IN KENYA - A *HUMAN CENTERED APPROACH*

*Teresa Njue¹, Stanley Wafula² and Francis Murage³

*Corresponding author

Masai Technical Training Institute

P.O Box 125 – 01100 Kajiado - Kenya

Email: teresanjue2015@gmail.com info@masaitech.ac.ke

ABSTRACT

Open and distance learning continue to play fundamental role in contributing to the construction of knowledge societies in a lifelong learning context. Despite educational challenges of the 21st century, and notably the COVID-19 global disruption in the education sector, open and distance learning concept has achieved notable recognition. It has had substantial impact on all education delivery systems. The objective of the research project was to assess the impact of open and distance learning approaches on education and empowerment of girls and women in Kenya's *maasai* nomadic community. The project was implemented during a fellowship program re-imagining African education in the wake of COVID 19. The research project was carried out in a formal, informal and non-formal setup. Community-led alternative learning model advocates for education practices that match and reflect the needs and circumstances of the excluded/disadvantaged populations. The model integrated open and distance learning concept in a community based learning. The project targeted six local *maasai* women groups on house construction skills through purposive sampling technique. Human centered design approach was intensively employed in co-creating and co-designing the ODL-Community based learning approach. Key processes were triggering the community, ideation, prototyping, feedback, iteration and implementation. The instruction and assessment was facilitated virtually (80%), guided by a local translator and site visit by TVET instructors (20%). A community of learning was established with 10 local champions enrolled in instructor support training through blended approaches. Data was quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed. Findings underscored that open and distance learning significantly reduced the constraints of time and place, reduced educational bottlenecks experienced in the traditional face-to-face system. It has significantly shifted knowledge, attitudes and perceptions in girls and women education. There was increased demand for learning and explored flexible and blended learning opportunities in disadvantaged and hard to reach areas. The project recommended affordable technology and digital learning strategies to improve equity and inclusion in education. Strengthen partnerships between communities, public and private sector for an enabling environment that includes digital infrastructure and digital skills user

Key Words: Open and Distance Learning, Human Centered Design, Innovations

1.1 Introduction

Despite the growing focus on lifelong learning in the education sector, the (Open and Distance Learning) ODL community is making significant advances in the direction of lifelong learning, while making reference to conventional pedagogical framework within formal education. Lee, Ward, Chang and Downing, (2021) describes the challenges faced by students in their transition from dependent to independent learning and the inability of distance education to support the transition. Mishra, Gupta and Shree, (2020) also points out that the ODL community should explore into the importance of non-formal and informal learning, stating that ‘they have a great potential for helping a wide range of learners achieve more desirable and rewarding circumstances for themselves and their communities’ but that ‘these two important modes of provision are insufficiently represented in the literature of open and distance learning’ (p.40). Thus, while there is potential for ODL to facilitate lifelong learning, within and beyond the formal education sector, this potential is yet to be realized.

The universalization of education and its worldwide acceptance as a continuous or lifelong undertaking, coupled with concerns about educational access and equity (Kimani, 2021), as well as the prevailing level of poverty, necessitate the use of various education delivery approaches to enable all citizens to benefit from this public good.

Open Distance Learning extends the benefits of learning opportunities anytime, anywhere to implement positive change the lives of the most marginalised and underserved populations. In theory, ODL should not only enhance access to education, but also create externalities which can influence the development process. Wilson and Pretorius (2019) argues that ‘government funding of distance education should be supported on the grounds that this is the most efficient way of meeting the educational needs of those living “bad lives” (p. 167).

Distance education is an approach that takes education to the many learners who are separated, by time and space, from those who are teaching. It is a mode that has a high potential for transcending barriers that are caused by distance, time, age among others; thus facilitating lifelong learning. Community led interventions provide structures to access communities and learners; and embed learning programs in local systems and structures. ODL approaches in community based learning expands the horizons and diversifies contacts within communities while tapping into the potential of non-education structures. Today, distance education programs are able to make full use of information and communication technology through the application of a wide range of media: print, audio-visual, CD-ROM, computers and the Internet. Through distance education the learner enjoys a high degree of autonomy in deciding what, when and how to learn.

Open learning is a much wider concept than distance education but it is much more difficult to implement. It encompasses all forms of education and training, and can take place within multiple modes. As such it can be conducted parallel to and/or integrated with formal/conventional education and training (Noor, Aziz, Harun, Aminudin, Zakariah & Wangsa, 2022). The system can be defined as one in which the restrictions placed on students are under constant review and removed wherever possible. Openness is considered in relation to intake, participation, progression, completion and achievement. Barriers include the student’s economic.

Women's issues are multi-dimensional and interlinked, including socio-cultural, traditional, and economic factors that affect women's status. This is especially the case in the Narok County in the Rift Valley Province of Kenya, where Maasai traditions and cultural practices are well preserved and practiced. Due to the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and early marriages in the community, girls' participation in education is affected and restricted (Takayanagi, 2014). Moreover, many girls are brought up to be subservient to men and are regarded as a gift from a father to a future husband (Mwangi, 2021). Most women are expected to depend first on their parents, then on their husbands, and ultimately, on their sons. Because of this obvious gender inequality, women's access to resources as well as even basic education is limited and therefore disfranchises their role in making a positive social change in the male-dominant community.

Educational policy reform movements and awareness campaigns have spawned many community-based interventions in education. Dropout prevention programs, vocational training, primary skills curriculum, achievement tracking, and accelerated learning programs are just a few examples of these interventions. Community participation in education is fundamental. It includes the processes and activities that allow community members to be heard, that empower them to be part of decision-making processes and that enable them to take direct action on education issues (INEE, 2021).

The essence of ODL teaching and training in this case study is based on the magnificent contribution in the education for girls and women. The study explores effectiveness of distance learning in a community based learning program. Community led education models address issues that community members identify with.

1.2 Problem of the Study

Women and girls participation; access, enrolment and completion data raises serious questions in relation to equity, quality and the sustainability of education programs in Kenya. The low female students enrolment observed in TVET institutions illustrates how the ability to finance education and skills development is underlying barrier limiting access to education. Online distance education approaches provide opportunity to overcome factors that hinder learners from engaging in educational processes with an opportunity for life-long learning. , (Kara, Erdogan, Kokoç, & Cagiltay, 2019). This study therefore assessed the impact of open and distance learning approaches on community based learning education for girls and women in Kenya's *maasai* nomadic community.

1.3 Research Objective

The objective of the research project was to assess the impact of Open and Distance Learning approaches on community based learning for girls and women in Kenya's *maasai* nomadic community.

1.4 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design where primary and secondary were collected. The target population was sampled using purposive sampling technique. Data was collected from instructors, ODL administrators and education officers. Non-education groups (women groups) were purposefully included and supported through training so that they could successfully support education activities.

The research project was carried out in a formal, informal and non-formal setup. Community-led alternative learning model advocates for education practices that match and reflect the needs and circumstances of the excluded/disadvantaged populations. The model integrated open and distance learning concept in a community based learning. The project targeted six local *maasai* women groups on house construction skills through purposive sampling technique. Human centered design approach was intensively employed in co-creating and co-designing the ODL-Community based learning approach. Key processes were triggering the community, ideation, prototyping, feedback, iteration and implementation.

The researcher iteratively and routinely listened to communities at every step of the way: identifying issues, making programming decisions, conducting monitoring and evaluation. Active listening became a necessary part of every decision. Listening to the communities at the beginning of the project and participating in their experiences identified new barriers and possible solution.

The instruction and assessment was facilitated virtually (80%), guided by a local translator and site visit by Masai Technical Training Institute- TVET instructors (20%). Data was quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed.

1.5 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings are from the targeted six local *maasai* women groups undertaking house construction skills. A community of learning was established with 10 local champions enrolled in instructor support training through ODL blended approaches. The application of ODL approaches collaborated with Technical Vocational Training programs and non-formal adult learning programs increased women and girls enrolment for literacy and numeracy by 23 % during and after the COVID 19 pandemic.

ODL and community based linked education activities with income generation initiatives where women groups accessed funding to establish social economic activities that support education programs. Two more women groups increased their advocacy on education by 12%, connected with existing financial institutions and promote positive attitudes and behaviors regarding girls' education. They are actively involved in advocating for out-of-school girls to be enrolled in government schools and subsidizing their fees.

The interviewed women group leaders expressed the view that the low literacy levels hinder women's development. However, they are also aware of the power and knowledge that village women have to improve the well-being of their community. In addition, they also confirmed that the issue of illiteracy could be overcome by cooperative learning being applied to generate necessary skills.

Further the findings indicated various ways of realization of successful Distance Learning Environment for marginalised communities. These are;

1.5.1 Making of the Distance Learning Fun

The study found a strong influence on enhancing learning through ODL. Respondents found ODL approaches encouraged learning, creativity in a distance classroom. One of the respondents indicated

“We felt motivated to keep coming back to virtual lessons, engage with group work, and do their independent work. Learning to make use of digital resources like videos, interactive games, and hands-on activities during the house construction sessions made us like learning.”

80% of the learning approach was co-designed and co-created by the community with the end user in mind. The learning was customized to meet the needs and goals of the target population and objectives of education. This motivates learners to learn and means that can keep track of student needs.

1.5.2 Blended and Flexible Approaches

Face-to-face was for conversations, feedback, and hands-on projects video content, investigatory projects, or independent research was embedded in a formal TVET institute LMS platform to ensure that students familiarize themselves with topics before coming to class. Using an LMS or other application for sharing content can help immensely in a distance learning environment. In addition, an LMS will usually allow you to easily share videos or other content with students as “assignments.” The respondents shared work on group projects and individuals and instructors provided feedback on timely basis. The interactions provided room for career exploration. 57 girls were reached out and enrolled in formal education system their mothers and who participated in this project. There was on campus and out of campus site visits. There was a strong, positive and significant relation between the outcome of the on campus and out of campus learners. 72 % of the learners in out of campus (community learning centers) posted 80% pass rate compared to 68% in campus;all accessing face to face and online approaches and instruction.

1.5.3 Make learning as Collaborative and Interactive as Possible

The respondents agreed that the distance learning environment was deeply interactive. 42% of the participants in break-out rooms that are available with most video conference platforms admitted that they were able to complete group work and/or discussion, assign practical projects as homework, and use interactive activities and games where suitable. A women group was quoted,

“Prioritizing group assignments over individual homework, and making use of break-out rooms during class time to give groups dedicated time to catch up. Respondents were kept accountable to their assigned learning activities.”

Further, during the study, the program attracted 2 mentoring TVET institutions who continue to provide support to the women and girls in marginalised areas.

1.5.8 Reliable and Available Resources

The instructors maintained that having a reliable resource is fundamental in learning processes. 76% of instructors and education officers concurred that ODL is a rich pool of resources that are yet to be utilized. Further they confirmed that, the resources could serve a wide range of purposes in essential formal and non-formal education programs in successful distance learning. The instructors asserted that use of ODL resources improved their pedagogical competencies to present comprehensible and appropriate content to learners. The lead instructor responded,

“Not everyone learns in the same way, and some students may need additional help in certain areas. Find learning resources that allow for differentiated learning, such as videos that come with captions/voice-overs in different language levels or different languages is very influential. Learners can investigate and participate in experiments with available digital labs, created to support teaching hands on skills.”

House construction is a reserve for women in *maasai* community. However, the activity involves use of trees and grass, a threat to the environment. Through technologically available resources, the local women groups have improved house construction skills with support from the on campus instructors who provided online tools, demonstrations and instructions. This has improved conservation of the environment and adaptation to locally available and affordable materials.

1.6 CONCLUSIONS

ODL increased community involvement, cohesion and the increased potential for sustainable outcomes allowing establishment of genuine mutually beneficial partnerships between formal and informal education programs.

The data illustrated that the women group leaders play a facilitative role in inducing informal learning, and they also attempt to improve women’s low status in the community by providing knowledge and raising women’s economic activities.

It can be concluded that empowerment is achieved not through rote learning but through heutagogical approaches including having control over one’s own learning and engaging in reflective practices which result in competency and capability through self-awareness, articulation of feelings, experiences, and ideas, engagement in group discussion, self-directed investigation in developing independent ideas, and self-confidence.

The present study substantiates these arguments, showing that transformative non-formal and informal learning play a key role in the empowerment process. Moreover, it highlights the need to understand, conceptualize and operationalize lifelong learning beyond the realm of formal schooling, in order to make advances towards achieving the SDGs, particularly in terms of gender empowerment.

1.7 Recommendations

The project recommended affordable technology and digital learning strategies to improve equity and inclusion in education. Strengthen partnerships between communities, public and private sector for an enabling environment, close the gender digital gap to continue supporting women and girls participation in education..

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