

Triumph of Technology? An Exploration of the Impact of Online Facilitation on Law Students' Participation and Performance Before, During and After the COVID Lockdown in Nigeria

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Abstract

The starting point for this study is the view of technology-enhanced learning as a means to an end - not an end in itself. Hence, the drive to ensure access to quality education through technology-enhanced ODeL methods (like Zoom meetings) is incomplete without positive learning outcomes for learners in whose interest such technology is deployed. The study therefore seeks to examine the relationship between learners' participation in online facilitation via Zoom meetings, and their performance as measured by their results. The study employs the interview technique comparing selected learners' participation in online facilitation, learning experiences and performance in specific courses across three different time spaces. The study further explores other variables which may impact on learners' learning experience and performance, and proposes possible interventions to ensure that the goals of technological-enhanced learning are achieved.

1.0 Introduction and Background

Technology-enhanced learning is defined as the application of information and communication technologies (ICT) to teaching and learning (Kirkwood and Price, 2013). Such enhancement may be directed at replicating and/or supplementing existing teaching methods; or how teachers teach and learners learn as measured by learning outcomes. Owing to the investment and infrastructure required to deploy technology-enhanced learning especially in single mode (ODeL) or dual-mode institutions, there is the possibility of viewing such successful deployment as the achievement without exploring the initial aim of such deployment and its effect on the subjects of deployment (i.e. teachers and learners).

The COVID-19 was first discovered in Nigeria in February 2020. Thereafter, the first nationwide lockdown commenced on 30th March 2020 over a cumulative period of 6 months (VOA 2020). During this period, about 98% of tertiary education learners in Sub-Saharan Africa had their studies significantly disrupted (World Bank Group). In Nigeria, a significant portion of the 2 million tertiary student population were unable to learn. However, learning continued in the National Open University of (NOUN) both synchronously (through the recently introduced Zoom Online Facilitation platform) and asynchronously (with course materials, Zoom recordings and instructional videos).

The focus of this paper is on learner's experience of technology-enhanced learning in NOUN (Nigeria's sole single-mode ODL institution). Having recently deployed technology in furtherance of online learning, the paper seeks to explore the impact on learners' learning outcomes. The paper commences with a background on learning in NOUN and goes on to discuss the findings of empirical research on the impact of online facilitation on learners' learning outcomes and experiences.

1.1 Distance Learning in NOUN

NOUN is the sole single mode distance learning tertiary institution in Nigeria. With a student population of over 500,000, it is also the largest tertiary institution in Nigeria. Revived in 2002 the institution is organised as a tertiary institution with presence and accessibility in every state of Nigeria. This is achieved through the study centre system – each study centre being a mini-NOUN with structures to reach and provide avenues for physical contact and/or engagement for learners within that region.

Learning in NOUN has gone through a number of cycles. Initially, learning was purely learner-centred in that course materials were provided for learners who took responsibility for their own study with no added teaching support. Moving on from that point, the need for some form of facilitation to enrich learners' learning and deepen their knowledge was highlighted. This birthed the advent of the face-to-face facilitation period where internal and external academic staff were engaged by NOUN to provide face-to-face facilitation to learners. In keeping with the ODL ethos, facilitation was optional.

Late 2019 saw the pilot of the online facilitation mode of instruction. Using the Zoom platform, learners were offered live synchronous facilitation. Video recordings of these classes were also accessible for asynchronous learning. The COVID-19 lockdown of 2020 provided an opportunity for continuation of online-facilitation and

withdrawal of face-to-face facilitation. More courses were added and online live sessions were available between March – May 2020 for the 2020_1 semester. During the lockdown, learners were also given the option to take their examinations through virtual mode or to wait to take part in physical examinations after the lockdown. By early 2021, the NOUN Learning Management System (LMS) had been fully deployed and online facilitation expanded. At present the sole-mode of teaching in NOUN is by online facilitation (both synchronous via live classes and asynchronous via Zoom recordings and instructional videos).

Online facilitation was deployed in NOUN to provide learners with several means to connect with the institution in order to learn their courses and improve themselves. Four major goals of NOUN's online facilitation are (LCMS 2021):

- a. The opportunity for learners to connect live with their facilitators
- b. Support from facilitators explain difficult concepts to learners and help them work through their courses successfully
- c. Access to asynchronous learning through instructional videos to help in their understanding of difficult concepts and gaining of requisite knowledge
- d. Opportunities for interaction through discussion fora and chats

With particular reference to the law degree, face-face facilitation had been available for all law courses from 100L to 500L since facilitation commenced in NOUN. This is in keeping with the need to provide teaching support for the theoretical aspects of the law degree and practice. Furthermore, the law degree heavily regulated (sector-wide by the Nigerian Universities Commission and course specific by the Council of Legal Education), one requirement is for full-time teaching and learning

The NOUN LMS system with the Zoom online facilitation accompaniment has been hailed as one of the successes of the distance learning in Nigeria. For one, its availability ensured that though the entire nation was on lockdown, it did not interrupt learning in NOUN. Similarly, the perennial problem of industrial action occasioned by the ongoing dispute between the Academic Staff of Universities Union (ASUU) and the Federal Government has not affected learning in NOUN. Lectures and examinations go on as planned and learners graduate when they should.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the independence theory which identifies learner independence as an essential component of distance education. Wedemeyer (1961) identifies the essential elements of independent learning as greater student responsibility, widely available instruction, an effective mix of media methods, adaptation to individual differences and a wide variety of start, stop and learn times. Holmberg (1989) further clamours for meaningful learning not rote learning. To him, teaching means facilitation of learning which integrates and encourages critical thinking and far reaching student autonomy. Also distance education is a concept that covers the learning-teaching activities in the cognitive and/or psycho-motor and affective domains of an individual learner and a supporting organization. It is characterized by non-contiguous communication and can be carried out anywhere and at any time, making it attractive to adults with professional and social commitments (Holmberg, 1989, p. 168).

Open and Distance learning in NOUN is learner-centred i.e. learners are expected to take significant responsibility of their learning. With the introduction of face-to-face facilitation and subsequently, online facilitation learners remain independent but guided in their learning through synchronous or asynchronous learning. The non-contiguous design of learning enables the learner to learn at any place, at their pace. This further strengthens learners' independence and encourages learner control. In line with Baynton's (1992) model of control, online facilitation affords the learner the opportunity to strike a balance between independence, competence acquired through learning, and human/technological support afforded directly through online-facilitation and via discussion fora and chats integrated into the LMS.

NOUN's goals of online facilitation align with the theoretical constructs of interaction and transactional distance. Interaction in distance education takes place on four levels: learner-instructor, learner content, learner-leamer and learner-interface (Moore, 1989; Hillman, Hills and Gunawardena, 1984). Effective interaction results in a shrinking of the transactional distance between the learner and the instructor (geographical location notwithstanding).

3. Focus of the Study and Research Methodology

This study is based a means-to-an-end notion which views technology-enhanced learning as both a goal and a means to an overarching end. The study explores the purpose for deploying technology-enhanced education in the first place. Taking a ‘good work-then-more work’ approach, it seeks to explore whether, beyond its successful deployment as a replacement of the traditional face-to-face facilitation, NOUN’s online facilitation resulted in positive learning outcomes and experiences for learners i.e. the extent to which learners’ understanding of the theoretical concepts in the selected courses was deepened through online facilitation, grades improved and LCMS’ aforementioned goals of online facilitation achieved.

This study design is mixed-method empirical study comprising of desk reviews of relevant information and qualitative research data obtained through semi-structured telephone interviews administered on law students who were afforded the opportunity to participate in online facilitation between the September/October 2019 during the pilot phase until second semester 2021 (September/October 2021). Two law courses facilitated during the time period were selected for review (for ethical reasons, we shall refer to them as Course 1 and Course 2). Course I is a 400L core course available in two parts while Course II is an elective 500L course first facilitated online during the COVID-19 lockdown in March/April 2020 and thereafter throughout the study period. The choice of interview method was informed by the need to better understand and explore participants’ experiences and opinions. It gave participants the opportunity to better explain and describe a range of opinions from a personal standpoint. This also informed the use of open-ended questions to collect useful in-depth information.

From our records, a total of 137 learners registered for either and/or both courses. All such learners were contacted via email and requested to take part in the interview. Of those contacted, 11 learners responded indicating their interest and 10 were successfully interviewed over the telephone. The researcher had hoped for better response from prospective participants. This would have ensured a more diverse range of characteristics particularly age, employment status and final learning outcomes. However, only those learners who responded to the invitation, gave their consent to being interviewed and/or were available to participate could be interviewed. This constitutes a limitation to this research. Though the number of participants may not be representative of the target population both in numerical and diversity terms. This study provides useful information and lays a good foundation for further research on the impact of technology enabled learning on learners’ participation, learning outcome and learning experiences.

4. Results and Discussion of Findings

Research findings will be discussed under two broad headings. In the first part of this section, results of desk reviews will be displayed whilst interview data will be discussed in the second part.

4.1 Result of Desk Research on Participation in Online Facilitation

As the facilitator it has been generally observed that physical attendance at face-to-face facilitation only improved slightly during online facilitation between March-May 2020. However, Zoom recording analytics indicated that a number of learners viewed the recordings posted on the LMS and/or downloaded same. Tables 1 and 2 provide analytics for Course 1 and 2 taken during the COVID-19 period in March-May 2020

Lesson No.	Number of Views	Number of Downloads
1	23	4
2	10	3
3	8	2
4	5	2
5	6	1
6	5	2
7	2	1

Table 1: Recording Analytics for Course 1 (Mar-May 2020)

Lesson No.	Number of Views	Number of Downloads
1	41	6
2	13	3

3	13	1
4	10	4
5	6	4
6	5	2
7	11	5
8	8	6
9	4	3

Table 2: Recording Analytics for Course 2 (Mar – May 2020)

As the above data indicate, viewing and/or download numbers were quite low for some lessons while a good number of views were observed in others. Furthermore a successive analysis of viewing figures indicate that learners' interest may have waned as progress was made in the course. This is at variance with interview subjects responses on their level of interest as the course progressed. The reason for the trend observed in viewing figures merits further exploration. However, it does not constitute part of the focus of this study.

4.2 Interview Data

As earlier stated, student outcomes being measured include improved performance and positive learning experience. Improved performance was measured by comparing learners' grades and understanding of relevant concepts during the era of face-to-face facilitation with their grade and understanding of concepts after taking part in online facilitation. It is noteworthy none of the participants attended any face-to-face facilitation. Furthermore, interview participants indicated that they attended most of the online facilitation sessions and viewed instructional videos. As a result, there is no control variable (i.e. a student who did not or attended just a few online facilitation sessions for comparison). This gap notwithstanding, two interview participants indicated that they were constrained to take Course 2 twice (first during the era of face-to-face facilitation and second through online facilitation) owing to missing scores. Their performance can therefore shed comparative light on the impact of online facilitation on performance, their previous attempt being used as a control variable.

4.2.1 Impact on Grades

All participants agreed that their grades improved after taking part in online facilitation – all passing the courses with at least a 'C' grade ($\geq 50\%$). For those who only wrote the course examination once, their measurement of their level of improvement in grades was with reference to their result trends as observed from assessments in previous courses. One of such participants stated:

"There is a difference! My grade has improved. My 200 level and 100 level grades were bad. I didn't fail - they were mainly Cs and Ds but this semester [2021_2] I made 2As, 2Bs and 1c. If I had been like this, I would have done better. It has improved in every area. I'm begging them to do online facilitation in all courses"

The two participants who attempted Course 2 for the second time both reported that their grades improved following online facilitation. One of them stated:

"...I wrote [Course 2] two times. The second time, I was just reading to pass because I had done it before. I was just doing it again because of missing scores.. I didn't put the same effort but still made the same grade so Zoom made it better for me. If I had put in same effort as the first time, I would have made and A"

4.2.2 Deeper Understanding of Concepts

As with improvement in grades, participants were unanimous in their opinion that online facilitation aided better understanding of the course. They noted that online facilitation afforded them the opportunity to seek explanations on difficult concepts, spell/pronounce difficult legal terms and relate the contents of their course materials to practical situations – outcomes they could not achieve by independent study alone. A participant noted:

"I can't really compare the two of them. Without online it's like 'I read it, let me give it to them the way they gave it to us in the book ... the way they wrote it. We wrote the exams and passed o. But sometimes, we don't know what we are writing. Someone explaining it to you with practical examples is so much better. And the facilitator made it so real. I learnt many lessons for my own life like how to secure my

land, how to register it and perfect my title. That if you buy land, you have not done all that you need to do... It's quite different when you are taught and when you read on your own."

To another participant, his deeper understanding improved his confidence:

"I have always wanted to study law. Online facilitation improved my confidence as a lawyer-to-be. Professional terms that I could not pronounce with confidence, I now can."

4.2.3. Convenience

ODeL mode of learning provides opportunity for learners to learn at their convenience. This has informed NOUN's policy on facilitation being optional. While online facilitation is fixed at a particular time, learners can join online from their location. None of the participants indicated that they were present in facilitator's location. Beyond physical presence attendance at live classes also meant that learners would need to forego personal engagements to pay attention in online class. However, for those who could not attend, there was the option to view recordings of previous facilitation sessions via Zoom recording. Learners were also afforded the opportunity to reach out for further clarification of any unclear concepts through the discussion forum, chats and direct emails to facilitators. These helped to further support those who missed classes.

Participants were unanimous online-facilitation more convenient for them. Issues like work and personal engagement made it impossible for them to commute to their study centres for face-to-face facilitation. As one participant noted,

"Technology is the order of the day. Face-to-face teaching is no more the real thing. I have done it before so I know what I'm saying. Physical [face-to-face] is good but people are so busy with family, work and so on. Zoom should not be ruled out as technology improves. It's not bad to have Zoom so wherever you are you can log on. I personally prefer Zoom. These days, I can't get up and drive to one school."

Another said

'Convenience is a better option. I'll better sit at home and learn there.'

4.2.4 Ability to Interact with Facilitators and Colleagues

Online facilitation afford learners live connection with facilitators. Though participants were also unanimous that online facilitation afforded them this advantage, it's no different from the face-to-face facilitation. As an added advantage, discussion and chat options on the LMS afford learners to interact and ask questions outside the fixed boundaries of face-to-face facilitation. Herein lies the utility of the LMS as a means to support online facilitation.

As with face to face facilitation, online facilitation could afford students the opportunity to interact with their peers. Hence the achievement of this purpose would also not be classed as an improvement per se. Furthermore, beyond confirming network quality, no participant had interacted with colleagues through the LMS or during online facilitation. Participants noted that interaction with peers was not a gap among learners as learners already had established means of interacting with themselves on social media. Participants confirmed that they belonged to various WhatsApp groups for peer-to-peer interaction. A number also organised themselves into discussion groups to facilitate their learning. Those groups remained active without need for further interaction through the LMS.

5. Gaps/Barriers to Positive Learning Experiences

Participants identified factors which operated as barriers or gaps impacting negatively on their learning experience through online facilitation:

a. Poor Internet Quality

All participants identified poor internet quality as a gap which impacted negatively on their learning experience and discouraged them from attending some live classes. Some further noted that sometimes the problem appeared

to be from the facilitator's end. In such cases, though learners could hear themselves, they could not hear the lecturer.

b. Timetable

Participants being mature learners in full-time employment found timing for online facilitation inconvenient where scheduled during working hours. The only participant who indicated that he attended all live sessions for Course 1 said that he usually joined from his office during working hours. This was possible because he was a senior management employee who had his own office and could insist on privacy. Though participants agreed that timing was not an issue during the lockdown, majority also confirmed that they did not attend all live sessions. Participants opined that the opportunity to ask questions on discussion fora and chat ameliorated this problem.

c. Lack of Information and Support on the Use of the online platform

Some participants noted that no training was offered to them on the use of the LMS or Zoom platform prior to commencement of facilitation. Only one participant was already used to Zoom and did not have any issues with online facilitation, for others Zoom platform was quite novel so they had initial difficulties signing or logging on, even when internet service was good. Such participants relied on colleagues for assistance.

Information dissemination was identified as a gap. Most participants all found out from their colleagues who may have visited the study centres. None of the participants heard about online facilitation from their WhatsApp groups. A participant that she got to know through reminder emails sent directly from the facilitator to all learners. As earlier noted, not all of these mails are delivered.

d. Facilitators' Delivery Style

Some participants identified facilitators delivery style as a barrier to their learning because some facilitation sessions were not interactive and learners were not given the opportunity to ask questions. Instead, facilitators merely repeated the information in their course materials to them. By contrast, participants attested to the interactive nature of online facilitation and impact on their understanding of Courses 1 and 2. They noted:

"Some facilitators are born, others are made. Our facilitators was born not made. She brought the course home. I used to tell my husband that [our facilitator] knows what she is talking about. Whether online, the facilitator matters. If the person is able to present the course well, I think it's a good job."

Another noted:

"Kudos to NOUN management for online facilitation. I was pleasantly surprised and excited. The impact was just overwhelming. It was just like I was in the classroom. My facilitator took time to explain and interact with us. She always used to say 'do you understand? If you don't ask now o'. Online classes really helped me ..."

e. Internet Data and Equipment Cost

Various studies identify internet data and equipment cost as major barriers to online learning in developing countries. Interestingly, none of the participants initially identified this as a barrier. When asked about it, the saw it as necessary inconvenience or sacrifice to access tertiary education. A participant stated that

"Zoom consumes more data but transportation, fuel and the traffic are avoided. I could not attend face-to-face in Lagos because before I drive from Oshogbo ... Cost and convenience are more than data. Online is the best thing. Cost is insignificant."

All other participants agreed with this view. To another participant:

"Let's look at it from a dialectical angle and balance it. Saying data is a problem is strait-jacketed. ... Conventional Universities also have additional costs like accommodation, transport, feeding and so on. Anyhow you look at it there are sundry costs on campus. Some private universities also use data. NOUN

is not the only one. It's now becoming a generalised practice in the system. There are incalculable risks not quantifiable in monetary terms. Cost of data is absolutely inconsequential."

It is noteworthy that all the participants are mature learners in well-paid employment. For them affordability is not a problem. The same is not the case for young school leavers without external financial support or disadvantaged/unreached learners for whom tertiary education is a major financial hurdle. By virtue of S.1 and (3) of the National Open University of Nigeria Act 1983, NOUN has a mandate to provide access to lifelong learning and tertiary education throughout Nigeria and beyond. The object of this unique 'social justice' mandate is to ensure equal and non-discriminatory access to tertiary education for disadvantaged persons or persons who may not be in a position to enrol for residential or conventional face to face. Such persons are usually also economically disadvantaged. Hence, for them cost of data and learning equipment is a significant barrier. Confronted with this point, participants all agreed that cost and equipment of data may be a barrier to others if not for them.

6. Conclusion

On the basis of its successful deployment alone, NOUN's LMS and online facilitation constitute a triumph of technology. Furthermore, its role as a means to improved learners' learning outcomes and learning experience have been achieved to a large extent. These successes notwithstanding, careful attention must be paid to ensure that they are not overshadowed by the barriers identified by learners. Deliberate steps must now be taken to eliminate them or mitigate their negative effects.