

Revisiting the Rationale for Training Online Instructors at the Open University of Tanzania

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Abstract

Online learning is increasingly becoming a prevalent feature in higher learning institutions globally. Online learning aims to increase access to education without compromising the quality of teaching and learning. Thus, online learning requires competent online instructors who have undergone training on how to teach in an online environment. According to the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) Information and Communication Technology (ICT) policy of 2019 the number of courses uploaded on Moodle does not comply with the e-learning standards. There is little evidence regarding instructors' effectiveness in executing online instruction roles. This paper examines the efficacy of instructors' training programmes using explanatory concurrent research design with data collected from 178 instructors at the Open University of Tanzania through questionnaires and interviews. Findings from the study indicated that generally, training has significant impact on the way instructors teach in the online environment. Although most of respondents rated training as an effective strategy for online instruction they lacked continuous training programmes while data from interview indicated that the package of training programmes missed some key content required by instructors. This paper suggests that, among other things, institutions should invest on continuous training programmes for online instructors and ensure inclusion of all key contents for the same.

Keywords: online instruction, online learning, Open University of Tanzania

Introduction

For many years, since independence in 1961, and even thereafter, enrolment in tertiary education had remained very low in Tanzania. By 1990, Tanzania had only two universities that is the University of Dar es Salaam and the Sokoine University of Agriculture. There was only one technical college, the Dar es Salaam Technical College, which later transformed to Dar es Salaam Institute of Technology. All three institutions had a total enrolment of just about 5,000 students. The recommendation to establish an open university came as a strategy to increase

enrolment at tertiary education, targeting those who had missed the chance, and who were now engaged in various life sustaining activities in both the public and private sectors. The university was to deliver its programmes by distance, hence making it not necessary for learners to reside in the university campus, as is the case in most contact face-to-face universities (OUT, 2018). The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) as a government institution was established by an Act of Parliament No. 17 of 1992. The Act became operational on 1st March, 1993 by publication of Notice No. 55 in the Official Government Gazette. The University started its operation in 1994 intended to offer open and distance learning(ODL) to all those who aspire to attain university education including the following: employed staff who could not study in conventional universities due to their career commitments; women who could not leave their families; aspiring people in remote rural areas; school leavers who had the minimum entry requirements but could not be admitted into conventional public universities due to capacity limitation; people with disabilities; and poor people who have qualifications but cannot meet the high tuition fee charged by the conventional universities.

By now, OUT operates through 27 regional centres spread throughout Tanzania Mainland and four coordination centres in Zanzibar, Pemba, Kahama and Tunduru. Each centre serves as a coordination and administrative centre, headed by a director. Since its inception OUT has been using print- based study materials as a dominant mode of course delivery like the case in most open and distance learning universities in Africa and elsewhere in the world. With the advancement of ICT, OUT has shifted its mode of course delivery from print-based materials to online instructions (Khatibu, 2017). From 2016/2017 academic year the University declared all undergraduate degree programmes to be taught by e-learning mode of delivery, except for some programmes such as B.SC (ICT) which are also being enhanced through various means such as short face-to-face session to complement e-learning (OUT, 2018). The reasons for this declaration was associated with improving the quality of teaching and learning to students, increase of enrolment and active number of students per year, increase supervised self-learning on part of students and improved quality of graduates and reduce cost of academic delivery (OUT, 2016).

Instructors use Moodle to facilitate course delivery using LMS tools such as discussion forums, assignment, chat forums and online lecture through zoom (OUT, 2021). Teaching and learning activities include recorded online lectures which are in form of video, audio or both then uploaded and made viewable on a MOODLE, real time lectures using video conference based on Zoom cloud meeting application, online discussion and online assignment, quizzes, chat forums and whiteboards (Lawi, 2021).

However, online teaching requires competent online instructors who have undergone training on how to teach in an online environment. Literature indicates that as online modes of study continue to expand, there is increasing awareness of the need for competent online instructors. Developing institutional competence for online instruction requires a careful approach to training online instructors and a workload investment in staff training and development (Gregory & Lodge, 2015). The ability to effectively communicate, manage technology, and deliver and assess content becomes especially important in intensive online environments, where there is less available time to familiarize to new tools and operating environments (Roddy et al, 2017). The monitoring of student progress, identification, and follow-up of issues or barriers are also critical duties for instructors to minimize the likelihood of student disengagement or withdrawal. In order to best support student learning, retention and degree completion online, instructors should be equipped with skills in course management, instruction, instructional design and student engagement in the online setting (Andrews & Hu, 2021). According to Vang et al (2020) online instructors begin online teaching with little or no specific training. According to the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) ICT policy of 2019 the number of courses uploaded on Moodle does not comply with the e-learning standards. There is little evidence regarding instructors' effectiveness in executing online instruction roles. This paper examines the efficacy of instructors' training programmes at the Open University of Tanzania.

Literature Review

The rationale of training online instructors

Teaching online is very different from face-to-face classrooms, where instructors observe learners' reactions real time, offer immediate clarification on complex topics, personally get to know learners and communicate face-to-face. This is completely different online, where

instructors have to manage the environment and guide learners, in addition to delivering content (Adnan et al, 2017). The transition to online teaching and learning from a traditional face-to-face approach challenges the expectations and roles of both instructors and learners. For some instructors, when they change the place of teaching, they feel that their identities are under threat. Many instructors see their professional identity being tied to their past face-to-face teaching where they had a high level of expertise. Redefining professional identity and teaching practices takes time. Without training, many instructors try to replicate the existing course design and pedagogical practices when they move from face-to-face teaching to online teaching (Redmond, 2011). Instructors face challenges at three phases with online education: the design, the delivery, and the follow-up. In the design phase, instructor must take into consideration how students learn and what to include assuring that the class materials interest and engaging students. Some of the suggested resources are the use of media, lecture notes, and other sources that can add to the class materials. Challenges with delivery are that many instructors are not able to translate the materials into the online medium. The follow-up phase deals with storage of the information, access to it later, and the dissemination of materials. In addition to the misunderstanding about the transfer of materials from one medium to another, instructors may feel a disconnection between the design produced by the curriculum and design team, and the actual delivery of class content (Kebritch, lipschuetz & Santiago, 2017). Instructors should be provided with capacity building training opportunities that allow them to develop knowledge, skills, and innovative teaching and assessment methods that can increase student engagement and attention to online classes (Leng et al, 2020). Training and orientation programs about online learning, including lessons on online teaching and learning tools and strategies, need to be offered on a regular basis so that students, instructors and staff could have the opportunity to advance their knowledge and understanding of the different aspects and nuances of online teaching (Heng & Sol, 2020).

Practices of professional training for online instructors

In the theory of Structured Training programme that systematically teach instructors to design, develop and deliver online classes are the most recommended form of training (Adnan et al, 2017). In practice training activities for online instructor often take the form of workshops, one-one-trainings, short session, less than two hours in length, and one time training (Mayer &

Murrell, 2014). According to Milhem et al (2014) training delivery methods include team training, mentoring, and seminars, field trips and Tours and e-learning. Some colleges prepare online instructors by providing specific courses and programmes while other colleges inadequately prepare instructors to teach online or even fail to provide any relevant training opportunities (Frass et al 2017).

Methodology

A questionnaire was developed and emailed to 322 OUT academic staffs that were spread through 27 regional centres in Tanzania Mainland and four coordinating centres in Unguja and Pemba in Zanzibar, Kahama and Tunduru. One hundred seventy-eight respondents returned the questionnaires, making a return rate of 58.1%. Qualitative data was also collected from 10 instructors.

Findings and Discussions

Training Content for Online Instructors

The first part of the result section presents findings on training Content for Online Instructors. Instructors were asked to rate YES or NO against the items regarding content that were covered during training. Instructors responses are as tabulated below:

Table 1: Training content for online instructors

| Item | N | Percentage |
|--|----------|-------------------|
| Training on how to develop materials suitable for online learners | 20 | 11% |
| How to upload lecture notes, links, recorded lectures, assignment and quiz in Moodle | 175 | 98% |
| How to conduct discussion forum | 170 | 96% |
| How to set quiz for online instructors | 178 | 100% |
| How to record lectures | 0 | 0% |
| Principles of online teaching | 20 | 11% |
| How to grade assignment and give feedback to students | 178 | 100% |
| Strategies for student feedback | 175 | 98% |
| Strategies for student interaction | 120 | 67% |

| | | |
|---|-----|-----|
| How to teach in real time online lecture using zoom | 170 | 96% |
| How to conduct oral examination in online environment | 166 | 88% |
| How to create zoom link for online lecture | 90 | 50% |

The findings above revealed that training conducted at the Open University of Tanzania included how to upload lecture notes, links, recorded lectures, assignment and quiz in Moodle how to set quiz for online instructors, how to grade assignment and give feedback to students, how to conduct oral examination in online environment, to teach in real time online lecture using zoom Strategies for student feedback however instructors were not taught on how to record online lectures, Training on how to develop materials suitable for online learners was rated by few instructors. Complementing to the findings from interview conducted with instructors, data revealed that some of contents uploaded in Moodle missed important parts as explained by one of the instructor:

We have a gap on how to write ODL materials, despite that we have adopted online teaching but materials (lecture notes) uploaded in Moodle should follow principles of ODL materials. Some lectures have just uploaded books with no study guide that in that book of 200 pages which chapters are relevant, when online teaching was introduced at OUT I was in study leave but when I was back I was just given a course to teach without any training and it was very hard time to me I contacted faculty IT personnel who assisted me at least now I know some issues but I'm experiencing a challenge of marking online assignment, and posting issue on the web page, So you frequently contact your fellow for assistance (Interview with instructor 1, July 17th, 2021).

The interview quotes above suggest that no training specifically for instructors on how to develop ODL materials has been offered, also there is lack of continuous training to students and instructors on awareness of online teaching/learning. This lack of relevant and continuous training for instructors and students who were teaching in online environment had a bearing on the implementation of the teaching through online mode. This laxity entails that understanding of what would be expected of instructors implementing online teaching was low among instructors, while negatively affecting students learning. Andrews and Hu (2021) reported that there is also a lack of common standards for the format and content of professional training for online instructors. Frankel et al (2020) suggested online instructors to enroll in an extended professional training program that includes topics on course design, pedagogy, technology skills and teaching

strategies. Training activities for online instructor often take the form of workshops, one-one trainings, short session, less than two hours in length, and one time training (Mayer & Murrell, 2014). Professional training should support online instructors to both develop technology skills and learn about pedagogy and andragogy for effective teaching. An example of screenshot of materials uploaded in Moodle with missing components.

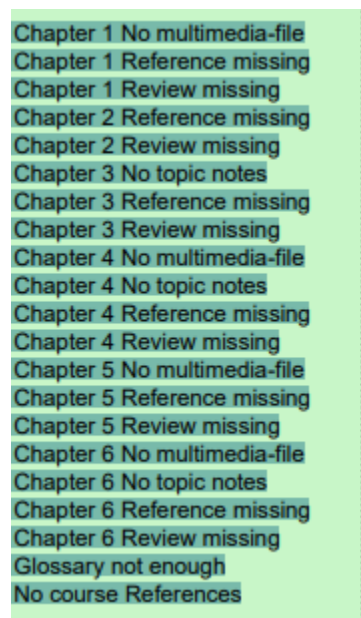


Figure 1: A screenshot for missing information in one of the course in Moodle

Approaches to Training Instructors Employed at the Open University of Tanzania

In terms of approach to training, questionnaire distributed to instructors indicated that instructors were trained through workshop (90%), e-learning-zoom (95%), and e-learning-Moodle 0%, peer support 45%, field trips and tours 0%, team training 10%, traditional long term course 0%.

The most approach of training instructors was zoom 95% and workshop 90% but there were no field trips and tours and no long term course. However, field trip and tour was to be very important because most of instructors have never been taught through online mode when they were students so they develop fear of the loss of a comfortable and successful approach to teaching. Complementing to the findings obtained through interview indicated that training was conducted at the Open University of Tanzania through zoom and workshop as indicated by one instructor from regional centre A:

I attended training for one day at headquarter and I remember it was in 2016 when there was a marking and we learned on how to teach through Moodle but when zoom was introduced we learned how to teach using zoom and how to conduct oral examinations including invigilation and asking question including follow up question as well as grading (Interview with instructor 4, August 8th, 2021).

Instructors attended training through face to face at the headquarter and with zoom instructors participate wherever they are. Moodle was not used to train online instructors. Chang-Tik (2017) reported that in most universities, lecturer training was predominantly in the face-to-face mode. It was regarded as an effective intervention for enhancing lecturer performance to achieve a competitive advantage in the marketplace. This training was conducted in a blended mode, that is, it involved an online self-paced learning, followed by an interactive online discussion, and ended with a face-to-face action learning which I suggest Open University of Tanzania to follow.

Instructors' Satisfaction with Online Training

The findings revealed that 84% instructors were not satisfied with the way training was while 16% were satisfied and this affected the way instructors teach. Most of instructors teaching through online mode needs training particularly on issues of pedagogy, technology and online classroom management skills, however this need intensive training and practices. Instructors may fail to teach an online class due to lack of knowledge to teach in an online environment. An interview conducted with instructors indicated that instructors resist to teach in an online environment due to lack of training as narrated below:

Sometimes instructors are blamed that they resist to teach through online mode but it is not true sometimes is due lack of training which equip instructors with knowledge and skills in order to teach in an online environment. Training acts as a motivation for instructors to teach through online mode. Instructors who participate in training and start teaching online develop positive attitude than those who have never teach in online environment (Interview with instructor 3, August 1st, 2021).

The extract above revealed that training instructors how to teach in an online environment motivates them to teach build confidence and positive attitude on online teaching. Sibley and Whitaker (2015) reported that Brown University combat resistance to teach online by offering financial incentives, such as paid professional development and extra funds to teach online courses to attract more online instructors. Anderson et al (2011) added that the perceived disconnect between the way teachers were taught to teach and how the course content must be delivered in an effective online classroom or knowledge of teaching online is a challenge for them. Heng and Sol (2020) suggested that training and orientation programs about online learning, including lessons on online teaching and learning tools and strategies, need to be offered on a regular basis so that students, teachers, and staff could have the opportunity to advance their knowledge and understanding of the different aspects and nuances of online and blended learning.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In order to create awareness and enhance the pedagogical skills, the universities should make necessary arrangements to provide their instructors with the required professional development training opportunities such as team training, mentoring, seminars, field trips and Tours and e-learning. Instructors mentioned training through zoom and face to face as the only approach employed to train instructors at the Open University of Tanzania. However, training through these approach were not even conducted frequently, other approach of training such as field trip and tours, Moodle, mentor were not used. The repercussion of inadequate training include instructors built negative attitudes towards online teaching through online mode and there was low participation of instructors in Moodle and some instructors failed even to attend real time lecture. Additionally, the findings revealed that training package missed some important content such as how create short video Crip for introduction, how to develop materials suitable for online students that are required to be uploaded in Moodle. This breed instructor not to include some important parts of courses uploaded in Moodle, also principles of online teaching was not covered.

This paper recommends institution to conduct frequent training to equip instructors with knowledge on how to teach in online environment. Instructors should be trained on pedagogical skills of teaching through online mode, principles of online teaching, assessment and evaluation,

classroom management, teaching and learning theories. Missing content in the training manuals should be added so as to equip instructors with necessary skills of online teaching.

Also instructors should attend a course on how to teach through online and be given certificates to qualify to teach in an online environment.

Instructors should be given an opportunity to visit other institutions offering online teaching so as to learn on how other universities conduct online teaching as an approach to training.

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