

**ROLE OF LEARNER'S CHARACTERISTICS IN DEVELOPING  
SELF- INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS FOR AN OPEN AND  
DISTANCE LEARNER: A CASE OF TWO SELECTED OPEN AND  
DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTIONS IN ZIMBABWE**

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**Abstract**

Open and distance learning (ODL) focuses on expanding access to learning. It combines two forms of education, that is, open and distance. Open and distance learning is characterised by two factors namely philosophy and its use of technology (Col; 2005). The philosophy behind ODL systems is to remove barriers thus improving access to education. On the other hand use of technology mediates learning. Hence the technology used maybe in form of print or non-print mode. In distance learning most successful courses are courses that offer immediate and tangible value to learners. Students involved in distance learning are often taking courses at significant personal cost. Therefore the instructional materials should be designed to enable the adult learner to achieve the intended educational goals. Consideration of ODL characteristics no doubt is vital in developing instructional materials (Knowles, 1990). It is against this background that the researcher wants to analyse the role of ODL characteristics in developing instructional materials. The philosophy underpinning this study is the qualitative paradigm using a case study method. Purposive sampling was employed to collect data from stakeholders involved in the development of instructional materials selected institutions that offer Open and Distance Learning. Face to face interviews, telephone interviews, emails, were used to collect data from stakeholders involved in development of self- instructional for an open and distant learner. The findings of the study would promote the development of quality instructional materials. In addition flaws in instructional development process will be identified and possible solutions will be sought.

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### Statement of the problem

What is the role of learners' characteristics in the development of ODL to instructional materials?

### Purpose of study

The purpose of the study is to examine the role of ODL learners' characteristics in developing instructional materials to promote the development of appropriate ODL instructional materials.

### Research Questions

- What is the role of ODL learners' characteristics in developing instructional materials?
- To what extent are ODL learners' characteristics affect the development of instructional materials?
- How do ODL institutions ensure that learners' characteristics are being observed when developing self- instructional materials?

### Review of related Literature

The researcher focussed on the following areas:

1. Open and Distance learning (ODL)
2. Distance Education
3. Instructional design
4. Characteristics of adult learners

### Open and Distance Learning

One of education's essential tasks is to help individuals to transform enabling one to understand oneself and to understand others. Education offers a genuine understanding of events and citizen to some extent. It provides individuals with terms of reference that would enable them to determine their place in the world (Unesco, 1996). Open and distance learning promotes access to education and is democratic. Individuals can learn anywhere and anytime (Col; 2005). Furthermore, open and distance learning provides a platform for life-long learning. ODL educators need to be aware of the characteristics of open and distant learner to come up with

appropriate instructional materials for the learner considering that open and distance learning caters for diverse students. It is against this background that the researcher wants to look or analyse at the role of learners' characteristics in developing instructional materials for open and distance learner.

Thus education's highest aim is to give everyone the means of playing an informed and active part as a citizen achieved with the framework of democratic societies.

### **Distance Education**

Distance Education (DE) has now become the focus of many educators the world over a far cry from its humble beginnings in each country's history (Rao 2001). The development of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions in the world has largely been done by conventional Universities (Holmberge 1981, Peters 2000, Izuagie 2001). When institutions created a DE unit, few of its members of staff or workers wanted to be associated with DE and open learning. Peters (2000) points out that these early developments started from scratch. These forerunners thus relied on experimentation from the existing education and teaching theories and practices. Distance educators agree that distance education includes both distance learning and teaching (Keegan 1990). Holmberge (1977) goes further and points that DE covers the various forms of study at all levels but are not supervised in lecture rooms or in the same premises but are planned, guided and taught by an institution. Rowntree (1992) believes that there should be an open learning continuum which addresses how easy the endurance is; to what extent they are free to choose the courses and how they pace themselves, and where they do it. With the advent of changes in industry's demand for more qualified personnel that may need to be trained whilst on the job, conventional universities and colleges have failed to cope. The economies of scale of this approach saw many people getting qualifications whilst they were on the job. Governments who are the recipients of most of the graduates get concerned when most of their people are not educated.

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institutions. These forerunners thus relied on experimentation from the existing education and teaching theories and practices.

Distance Education has been defined in many ways from informal ways to complex ways. In Zimbabwe numerous definitions have been used generally by the local population and specifically by distance educators themselves. It is common to hear it being referred to as “dzidzo yevakuru” meaning “adult education” despite the fact that conventional universities have fully fledged departments of adult education.

The definitions proffered at the beginning clearly support the notion that it is a discipline which has been around for a while. Even its historical background is full of its evolution in the development of teaching and learning methodologies appropriate to it. Some educators have pointed out that if a DE institution follows conventional methods it is doomed to fail. That is why Holmberge (1990) calls it a special educational discipline which is related to the discipline of education. However, Peters (2000) pleads that the tradition of teaching must not be forgotten in this new found discipline. Peters (ibid) proposes in addition that DE also analyses and take into account students’ special learning situations and account of it; students’ knowledge and action, instructional design and research in areas like teaching and learning, development and evaluation research and socio-psychological and sociological findings on the distance students’ social environment.

### **Characteristics of Adult learners**

ODL practitioners need to understand the characteristics of adult learners. Knowles (1990) has used the term andragogy to refer to the art and science of helping adult learners. It is based on self- directedness, experience, readiness to learn and is problem centred. It is the context of lifelong learning that understanding andragogy is essential to the design of effective learning environments. Thus consideration of adult learners characteristics is of vital importance. According to Knowles (1990) adult learners characteristics include;

- Motivation (intrinsic vs. external reward/ punishment)
- Learner orientation (self-directedness)

- Experience (as a learning resource for the individual and for a group sharing)
- Orientation to learning (task or problem centred vs. subject oriented)
- Readiness to learn ( prior learning as a consideration in course development)
- Personal circumstances ( situational, dispositional, cultural barriers)
- Personal learning styles.

On the whole Knowles (1990) summarises the above aspects under six categories as follows:

### **1. Adults need to know why they are learning**

Adults need to know the benefits of the education they are receiving. Adults need to know the benefits of the education they are receiving. They do not just accept the curriculum unlike school children. The benefits may be linked to job satisfaction or family style improvements. Thus the benefits may be seen at home and at work. Therefore ODL curricular should concentrate on what is beneficial to adult learners. The instructional developer need to consider whether the course materials are beneficial to the recipient. Caution is needed when writing the course materials. The course materials should achieve the intended goal of the learner.

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### **1. Adults are responsible and self-directed**

Open and distance learning is about academic access and choices (Col, 2005). The individual is afforded independence in learning. An adult learner is capable of directing his or her own life resulting in various educational choices which are linked to one's goals or endeavours. Adult learners are responsible and self-directed. The instructional materials should give appropriate guidance to enable the ODL learner to achieve learning tasks at hand. Instructional materials should be quite flexible and the learner should exercise some autonomy within a course.

**2. Adults come to post-school education with a wealth of experience.**

Adult learners have wealth of experience and are building on those experiences. The instructional developers therefore start from the known to the unknown.

**3. Adults are likely to choose to learn when they are ready to learn.**

Adults engage on courses with foreseeable benefits to them. Hence they tend to be highly motivated and have clear educational goals. They need guidance when choosing their courses.

**4. Adults are problem - centred**

Adults are goal – oriented. They use education to solve their problems. Therefore ODL courses should address adult learners’ societal problems.

**5. Adults are motivated by personal factors**

Adults tend to be motivated by personal factors. They are often in pursuit of job satisfaction and better quality of life.

### **Methodology**

A case study design under the qualitative paradigm was adopted. Creswell (2007,2009 ) asserts that qualitative research allows the researcher to do an in-depth study of the phenomenon. The aim of the study was to get an insight into the impact of adult learners characteristics when developing learning materials for adult learners. Therefore a sample of 30 participants was drawn from a population of lecturers involved in the development of self-instrument materials. 15 males and 15 female ODL lecturers constituted the sample. These lectures were drawn from the two selected ODL institutions.

### **Data collection**

Interviews guide was the main data collection tool. Participants responded to face to face interviews, emails as well as telephone interviews.

### **Findings**



### **Impact of learners' characteristics**

- A majority of the participants revealed that learners' characteristics have a great impact on development of ODL instrumental materials.
- ODL instructional if well designed promotes the achievements the learners' goals. Hence adult learners embark on particular courses to satisfy their educational needs to solve their personal problems.
- Students are enthusiastic to complete a course if it is beneficial to them. Well-structured materials is a driving force in guiding ODL students to achieve their educational goals.

### **Open and Distance Learning**

- Participants revealed that Distance Education has become so popular since it allows individuals to attain education wherever they are and at any given time. Hence the development of sound instructional materials supported by learners' characteristics has great implications on attainment of individual educational goals.

### **Distance Education**

- Participants revealed that distance education is an empowering tool. Adults can be equipped with needed skills either at home or at work. Employees can sharpen their skills while on the job. Institutions are able to equip their employees for them to be more productive.

### **Instructional Design**

- Participants revealed that learners' characteristics are the backbone of development of ODL instructional materials. Adult learners are goal-oriented and their success lie in the development of meaningful self-instructional materials. Courses are developed to satisfy the needs of learners. In addition particular learning theories should be observed taking into consideration the identified learners' characteristics.

### **Conclusion**

It is critical for instructional developers to consider learners characteristics when developing ODL learning materials. Learners' characteristics are the bedrock of development of the development of quality ODL instructional materials. Appropriate self –instructional materials assists adult learners in achieving their educational goals. Adults embark on courses which are beneficial to them

### **Recommendation**

- Developers of ODL instructional materials should consider characteristics of Adult learners when developing learning materials. A thorough needs assessment should be carried out in order to satisfy clients.
- Organisations that benefit from the various graduates should specify their expectations when materials of particular programmes are being developed. recipients of these graduates should be involved during the needs assessment process.
- Needs of particular students should be considered since students embark on particular programmes to solve personal problems as well as societal problems.

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