

E-learning and its influence on Teachers' Professional Development in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This paper sought to gain insight into e-learning and its influence on teachers' professional development in Zimbabwe. The methodological lens used in interrogating this issue comprised of the interpretive paradigm and qualitative approach. As sources of data fifty participants were purposively selected. Data was generated through literature method, focus group discussion and in-depth interviews. Analysis of the sourced data was narrative in nature buttressed by emerging themes. Findings acknowledged the existence of policies enabled the introduction of e-learning in teacher training institutions. It was further revealed that the implementation of the new framework that enabled the inclusion of e-learning in teachers' training courses. From the discussion it can be concluded that e-learning is indeed of much attention in various sectors of the education system to enable professional growth. The study recommended the provision of e-learning professional development and support to all college departments to ensure its successful integration into daily teacher training routines.

Key words: E-learning, professional development, teacher, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

E-learning made its way into our global village and has a huge potential in government as it strives to meet a growing demand for education while facing an escalating shortage of teachers (UNESCO, 2006). E-learning is seen as a tool for raising the number of students who have access to higher education, especially marginalized groups in rural areas, by being a cheaper and more flexible alternative (Dhanarajan, 2001). E-learning in teacher training has become an important aspect of successful instruction. It allows student teachers to learn more in less time, colleges to focus on global learning environments and is an effective pedagogical tool (Gulbahar, 2008).

For instance, in Zimbabwe, like in any other country had the privilege to encompass the modern way of communication which had also e-learning package that needed to be incorporated into the school's curriculum (Sadik, 2005). With this in mind, it has been noted that education, and training information from most teacher training institutions show that they

continue to lag behind in e-learning programmes. (Guha, 2000). As a way of giving rise to a strong e-learning foundation, Zimbabwe's Ministries of Education have made progress in making e-learning mandatory from primary to tertiary levels (Lau, 2008; Warschauer, 2003a). In this regard the researchers cannot afford to ignore e-learning programmes failing to meet the requirements of the current modern world, against the background of the need to accomplish sustainable scientific, and technological advancement in various spheres of our educational sector (Haddad & Draxler, 2002).

The most important vector is policy-related: the development of a visionary and strategic United Nations Organizational Learning Framework at system-wide level, which should encompass principles and actions built upon the common values and needs of all interested United Nations organizations (Rovai & Childress, 2002). The Framework should be agreed upon and owned by all of them. That could trigger synergies, prevent duplication and waste of resources and assure a minimum level of inter-agency solidarity so that no organization would be left behind, however small and with however few resources for learning (Leach, 2005; Sadik, 2005). For instance, Zimbabwe has made significant strides in amending and enacting policies (the constitution, national curriculum, educational policies, among others) to advance e-learning, and achieving the e-learning objective in different spheres of life (Venezky, 2004). The implementation of the 2-5-2 model in teacher training has generated a lot of quality assurance controversies among participants (Prestride, 2012). Although an e-readiness report of 2005 noted a significant trend of concentrating resources towards e-learning; the same noted that the use of new technologies for learning and teaching in Zimbabwe is still at a developmental stage (Chitanana et al., 2008). The mandate and mission of training hubs pertinently requires investing in the implementation of virtual learning environments. This study was an attempt to analyse the importance of e-learning in teachers' professional development in Zimbabwe.

2. Methodological Approach

In securing understandings of the participants' learning experiences, and their backgrounds concerning the issue under study, researcher adopted transformative paradigm and qualitative approach. This guided the researchers to highlight the uniqueness of situational, and circumstantial complexity of the issue under analysis. Thus, this methodological orientation was adopted on the footing that it provided the researcher with the experience grounded in data generation platforms (Gulbahar, 2008). It enabled researcher to discover how participants interacted, and why these interactions happened in the way they did in given circumstances. Resultantly through the literature method, case study, and in-depth interviews, helped in documenting participants' experiences with the view to answer the central question (Kutluca, 2010; Eke, 2011).

The target population of 300 trainee teachers in various teacher training centres. From this target population the researcher purposively selected a sample comprising of 70 students drawn from those on teaching practice and resident students. This, brought about an in-depth look at a small sample, which was determined by saturation. In this context, these participants were assumed to have acquired valuable experiences concerning the issue under investigation. Hence, these were seen to be in a better position to be considered credible, and dependable sources of data for the issue under investigation. Guided by principles of integrity and ethical clearance and the permission from both the Ministry of Primary and Secondary

Education and Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development were sorted, before data generation was undertaken.

In this study participants were guaranteed confidentiality through assigning pseudonyms in the form of a random alphabetical letters to each one of those involved in data generation (Merriam, 2009). All focus group discussions, and personal interviews were conducted largely in English. The data generated were broken down into smaller, and meaningful units, which were pieced together to form less numerous categories later classified into themes guiding the discourse of the findings. Researchers presented, analysed, and interpreted the themes or patterns in the context of the content with the view to expose the latent meaning behind the surface of the generated data (Unwin, 2005; Gulbahar, 2008).

3. Results And Discussion

The modern learning perspectives guide the presentation, analysis, and discussion on the need to fuse-learning into the teaching and learning environments. Thus, these perspective are intended to open up the avenues that are enshrined in the modernity packs of education which are hinged onto the focus on E-learning models. Hence, it guided in the unpacking of the underpinning concerns, which took shape during personal interviews, and focus group discussions (Halpin, 1998).

It's, therefore, crucial to acknowledge, a coordinated, more rigorous, systematic and pragmatic use of e-learning platforms, including joint platforms. E-learning is no longer just a cheaper option or a simple alternative to face-to-face or blended courses. E-learning is the most feasible and realistic way to ensure constant transformation and adaptation of the entire educational and developmental needs of the world and to maintain the relevance, competency, competitiveness and efficiency of members of the society in the discharge of their duties. It is against this background that this section follows up, arguments corroborated through participants' views, and experiences word for word. In turn, these were set against findings from other studies (Lankshear & Snyder, 2000; Lau, 2008).

E-learning capacity in teachers' training institutions

This section focuses on the relevance of information based on the preparedness of educational institutions on e-learning. In this regard, the participants stressed the need to address the issue of e-learning inadequacy in educational institutions, in a bid to gain skills and knowledge on the subject of e-learning. It is against this background that one of the selected participants expressed the following:

We don't have a computer lab at our college for us to access such that we acclimatise ourselves with the world of computers even though Computer subject is there on the timetable. Some of us where we learnt there were no computers or in some homes no modern communication gadgets which can be used to access internet (Interviewee 5)

From the above response, the researcher saw that the issue of e-learning is currently more theoretical than practical. Also there is a big gap that needs to be covered. This concurred with Focus Group Discussion Participant 12's that:

There are disparities between students, especially those in vulnerable situations; this is my case. I had never owned a computer and thanks to the digital inclusion aid program I got my first laptop. I cannot imagine how I could continue my

studies and teaching activities if am not equipped with necessary learning skills and knowledge. e-

The above response shows that there is no e-learning that is currently taking place. E-learning projects at teachers' training colleges have been hampered by infrastructural challenges. For instance lack of electricity, lack of necessary devices to facilitate continuous access to e-learning, higher internet costs and its unavailability and lack of space for establishment of e-learning centres. The incompetence of communication capacity jeopardizes accessibility of networked resources like e-textbooks, online journals and databases which are of great importance to teacher training and professional development (Van Braak et al., 2004; Venezky, 2004).

Another respondent said:

I also did not have a laptop of her own and had to stay after classes to complete her homework at the university library. When I got the opportunity to apply for digital inclusion aid, I got the necessary documentation and was awarded a grant. With a laptop purchase, my performance in the courses improved significantly and with the beginning of the pandemic face-to-face classes were suspended indefinitely and this laptop became even more important as I was able to remain active (Interviewee 19)

From the narration, it can be noted that learners need to be subjected to educational expeditions such that they can be afforded the opportunity to network such that they keep apprised with aspects of E-learning. As also noted by Kasse and Balunywa (2013), the prevalence of instructional strategies and prerequisite technical skills relevant in preparation, maintenance and management of an e-learning centre is still farfetched. This called for the manipulation of educational policies guiding e-learning study.

One of the participants supported this by saying: *In our college, there is an old dilapidated computer lab with outdated gadgets which are difficult to connect as to access internet. Also free internet services are poor most of the times which makes it difficult to research. It is against this background that I am of the feeling that in our tertiary colleges there should be furnished such a level that enabled our studies to be convenient especially by having standard computer labs. Under such a scenario we will be able to search for information on various courses that are on offer that enable us to acquire skills and knowledge to become better modern teachers (Interviewee 31).*

Participants have great feelings that e-learning is the only gateway that leads to an efficient and effective teaching and learning. An educational framework that is in tandem to the dictates of the modern society which is computerised. This is supported by another respondent when he had this to say:

E-learning is one of the components of the improvement system, both in providing educational services and in receiving them. The end result of its implementation in the educational process will be, in our opinion, the expansion of the boundaries of the educational environment with the ability not only to design individual educational technologies, and trajectory but also designing the curriculum independently; creation of unified information space in a separate educational institution; unification of information spaces within the domestic specialized educational institutions with the possibility of reaching the international level;

providing the opportunity to repeatedly study the covered material; use of the latest information in the field of the taught discipline, will make the learning process more visual (Focus Group Discussion Participant 50)

Therefore, it can be noted from the discourse above that the participant regretted the reduced access to contemporary fountains of information to enable them to keep an eye on different trends in education. This, therefore, revealed that the need to work towards improving the curriculum and align it towards E-learning. This concurs with Ngwoke and Numonde (2011) who noted that the availability of technologies came in handy in the demands of this global village which is computerised in its spheres of development. With this in mind, the next section focuses on the influence of policy transformation on Teacher Training College and professional development (Rovai & Childress, 2002; Halpin, 1998).

Advancing teachers' training in e-learning through policy transformation

This section centres on gaining insights into the influence of policies on guiding e-learning into the educational setups in Zimbabwe. This, therefore, called for the researcher to scrutinise these policies to set out how they tackle the issue of e-learning in teacher training and professional development. In this context, it was noted during the focus group discussions that one of the participants believed that without full investment in e-learning there is no progress in computer-based learning with the need to draw up comprehensive e-learning policies. In this regard, the following was thrown in:

It is regrettably disheartening that our government is not much emphasis on the issues to do with policy implementation as in various media platforms there are news of various government policies on e-learning but surprisingly here in colleges there is nothing to support point out. There is no evidence of policy directed professional development (Focus Group Discussion Participant 38)

From the above response the researcher was drawn to a clear view that there is lack of coordination from policy formulation to implementation and evaluation. This thus, leaves a gap in the field of e-learning where there is no coercion and trainees in teacher colleges and training institutions are found on the disadvantaged side. Policy guidelines are there but not monitored to the benefit and development of the education sector. This was supported by this participant:

I am now in my third year at this teachers' college but I have never heard of any news about policy evaluation or consultations but surprisingly we hear that the government has said this and that that needs to be followed in our teaching and learning environments. My question will then be who is coming out with these policies and where is that person getting all the information about the educational needs? They are just subscribing things for us without our involvement hence it will be difficult to implement something you are not familiar with especially e-learning (Interviewee 7)

The above response shows that a lot needs to be for the policies to be key in unlocking the world of e-learning. There is lack of direction in guiding e-learning towards achieving the objectives of a modern society which computer literate. According to Prestridge (2012) e-learning is the most appropriate skill required of a teacher, unfortunately, it is the least possessed by many educators. In that regard, this has compromised e-learning adoption in Teacher Training Colleges as lecturers and student teachers are affected by attitudinal

challenges. Eke (2011) puts it forward that E-learning adoption by student teachers is determined by their readiness for it especially if they are satisfied with the quality of service offered by e-learning which will in turn determine the extent of e-learning utilization.

4. Conclusion

From the generated, analyzed data and interpreted data, the researcher reached the conclusion that e-learning is not receiving enough attention regardless of the efforts that have been put by various stakeholders involved in its development. It is facing a huge setback on the implementation stage resulting poor outcomes in various teacher training institutions. A concerted effort towards the achievement of the e-learning is not being realized.

Following the research findings, the researcher makes the following recommendations. There is need to provide colleges with a range of e-learning infrastructure, resources and professional development training and support relevant to pedagogy and learning activities with the strategic plan aimed to identify college curriculum areas where e-learning is pertinent and deduce strategies to establish and promote its maximum utilization. Also, e-learning basics should be part of the Information and Communication Technologies curriculum and all students on Teaching Practice must communicate with the college and curriculum depth study supervisors on the e-learning platform for professional growth.

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