Achieving Pedagogical Richness
to meet the Needs of ODL Learners

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Abstract

Open Distance Learning (ODL) institutions around the world have realized that effective pedagogies are critical in retaining students. In addition, as technology becomes increasingly available and affordable, more ODL institutions are leveraging on various technologies of learning to provide more efficient and effective pedagogies. The Open University Malaysia (OUM), for example, adopts a blend of learning approaches to educate its growing number of learners spread across the country. The blend involves interactive print and electronic media to support self-learning, peer learning as well as learning that is facilitated by the tutor. A successful blend is one that provides the right amount of opportunity for learners to construct their own learning. As OUM continues to experiment with new ways of using technology, it is important for the learning to be more efficient and effective particularly to cater to its exponential growth in student numbers. How pedagogical richness is conceptualised through various technologies such as audio and video streaming, online discussions, multimedia and print is described in terms of dynamism and level of interactivity. How an improved blend of learning is achieved through the development of various learning modes, technology and media or delivery used is described. The model for the pedagogical richness (in response to the need to cater to the different learning styles and requirements of 45,000 learners who are dispersed geographically in over 70 locations, both urban and rural) is provided. The greater challenge of ensuring the effectiveness of tutors who need to be able to adapt (from their preferred teaching style) to the requirements of the various pedagogical strategies at OUM is also discussed.
Introduction

A major challenge with the availability and increasingly affordable learning technologies is ensuring their effectiveness in the learning and teaching environment. How one exploits or shapes the technology for learning and teaching will determine its effectiveness. According to Bates and Poole (2003), while technology has an important place in university teaching, it needs to be utilised with care and discrimination. It is no longer a question of whether we should use technology but in what contexts and for what purposes is technology appropriate for learning and teaching. Hence, acquiring technology is only just the beginning and to be used as a means to an end. It does not automatically deliver the solution. Not surprisingly, technology is attractive to distance learning providers wishing to leverage on technology. While some institutions immediately succeed in producing effective learning, many go through a series of trials and errors.

Technology succeeds if one has developed a good feel for technology and intuitively knows how best to shape it for learning and teaching. Only then will learners benefit. While technology can improve efficiency, its effectiveness depends on how well we understand the technology, the audience, the need, the content type and how best to address issues of implementation. Once these are addressed, we achieve a win-win situation for both the distant learning provider and the learner. It usually takes much experience before we develop some wisdom and realize that technology is nothing unless it produces learning. Specially trained educational technologists can help make the difference in designing instructional resources. Even then, only if the institution provides full support top down, supported by policies and financial resources do implementers succeed.

One of the fastest growing open distance learning institutions in the region is Open University Malaysia (OUM). From a mere 753 students in August 2001, it grew to almost 45,000 (in May 2006) students five years later. Although the number of students has grown by almost 60 times, the number of full-time faculty grew by three times over the same number of years. Additionally, OUM engages over 3,500 part-time tutors. It is believed that OUM’s success in leveraging on various learning technologies has enabled it to continue to provide optimal learning and teaching support. How OUM is successfully leveraging on technology and how it is strategizing for the future is described next.

Blended Learning at the Open University Malaysia

OUM is a university committed to being contemporary in character and forward looking. Its vision is to be a leader and innovator in open learning. In line with this, the university provides a learner-centred environment via the use of various media (largely technology-based) to deliver instruction. In the process, the ICT (information communication technology) and learning skills that learners acquire will better prepare them for lifelong learning in a knowledge society. Tutors will facilitate part of the learning and to provide greater educational value, learners are encouraged to learn
collaboratively through virtual discussion forums. Hence, OUM formulated a blended learning approach in its learning and teaching environment. This blend comprises self-managed learning, online learning and face-to-face interaction.

**Self-managed Learning**

Print modules are important. Hence, OUM develops modules for each course offered. This is because many open distant learning institutions such as the Open University in the United Kingdom, UNISA (University of South Africa), Korean National Open University, Indira Gandhi National Open University and Open University Hong Kong provide print modules for their students despite the wide range of learning technologies available to them.

Print modules at OUM are designed to be self-instructional, self-exploratory, interactive, learner-friendly and go through a systematic process of development. OUM trains module writers to write the way OUM wants it and appoints moderators to ensure that the contents are accurate, relevant and sufficient. To help the student cope with learning at OUM, one of the first two compulsory courses required of every student titled, “Learning Skills for Open Distance Learners,” is designed to help the student understand OUM’s blended learning in general and self-managed learning in particular. This course is compulsory and students take this in the first semester.

The university aims to supply all students with the modules at registration time. This is usually about a month away from the first face-to-face tutorial. In addition, students are encouraged to give their feedback to the modules via evaluation survey forms printed in the back of each module. The feedback serves to improve the quality of the modules produced.

**Face-to-Face (f2f) Interaction**

It is also felt that students will not be able to cope by just reading the print modules, that is, learning in isolation from others. Hence, face-to-face interactions in the form of fortnightly tutorials are blended together with other instructional formats. Attendance at face-to-face tutorials is, however, not compulsory for students. Tutorials involve explanations of key concepts are given, discussions of applications of concepts are held and exercises are done together. It is also when hands-on activities, demonstrations and presentations are held. In addition, tests are administered during two of the five tutorials. Each tutorial group is kept to 25 students and the same group goes online for discussions with their tutor. The latter is known as online learning.

**Online Learning**

From the beginning, online learning is one of OUM’s primary modes of learning. Originally limited to a few forms such as multimedia courseware, learning objects and online forum discussions, it has today expanded to include video conferencing as well as audio and video streaming.
At the beginning, few knew of the true potential of online learning. This is largely due to the didactic nature of learning and teaching environments that most faculty, tutors and students came from. In addition, few faculty members were familiar with interactive and individualized pedagogy (Levine & Sun, 2002). It was a daring move for OUM to insist, for example, that five percent of the course marks be allocated to active participation of students in the online forum discussions. At the time OUM made the decision, the Internet had just started to make an impact on the Malaysian society and being introduced to the education scene. Not all higher educational institutions, for example, had their Web sites published then. Bandwidth too was limited. The bandwidth for home subscribers was limited to 56Kbps via dial-up then. In contrast, many Internet home users today are able to subscribe to broadband Internet for less than RM100 (less than US$30) per month.

Online learning at OUM is delivered via the university’s myLMS, a learning management system that has evolved functionally over the semesters. Online forums have become increasingly useful and valuable since the introduction of Collaborative Online Learning in several of the courses in 2004 (Abas, Ahmed, Kuldip, & Harun, 2005). At times, students were required to be online for the first part of the course assignment. Only after the discussions, can students complete the rest of the assignment. Students’ frequent and quality participation contributes to five percent of the course marks. The maximum is two percent for frequency and three percent for quality of postings or interaction.

Initially perceived as a two-way forum between tutor and student, online discussions were not unlike question and answer sessions between student and tutor. In contrast, students today regard online discussions as a useful channel for multi-discussions relating to concepts, theories and applications. It has today taken a life of its own in an increasing number of tutorial groups. At times, students are interacting and discussing among themselves even before the tutor makes his or her presence felt. As testimony to the success of the online forums, in the recent online teaching and learning colloquium discussions between students, tutors and faculty (who served as moderators), students have proposed that OUM increases the five percent for participation in online forums to ten percent (of the course marks). They felt that forums now take up a substantial portion of their time, effort and more importantly contribute in a significant way to their learning experience.

As Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam & Dunlap (2004) state, collaborative online learning communities provide community members the chance to learn from and with others and to contribute to others’ learning. They also highlighted the fact that teachers are a critical component of bounded learning communities. Among others, they felt that teachers must model effective collaboration and knowledge construction, apply instructional strategies, supervise student activities, monitor and assess learning, providing feedback, remediation, and grades, troubleshoot and resolve problems, including meeting needs of hard-to-reach students, and establish trusting relationships with students. OUM expects tutors to be able to do all these. The training sessions for new tutors also highlight these issues.
Planning for Pedagogical Richness

As part of the preparation for OUM’s exponential growth in the next few years and how learners continue to demand for learning effectiveness through various modes of learning, the university, through its Centre for Instructional Design and Technology (CiDT), is experimenting with more electronic deliveries of instruction.

Apart from its existing multimedia courseware distributed on CDs, it is re-vitalising its earlier concept of web-based learning objects to make them more relevant and meaningful for learners. CiDT is also starting to “webify” existing multimedia courseware. This will enable the distribution of web-based learning objects through OUM’s myLMS in small doses rather than having students sit through lengthy multimedia lessons on CDs. A prototype is being developed to demonstrate the concept of suitably sized learning objects to faculty for their feedback and approval. In addition, an e-gaming prototype is being developed for engineering students to help students apply important but abstract concepts such as in topics related to structural analysis.

In addition, as the country implements its national broadband plan, audio and video streaming of “lectures” are being introduced. Called, i-Tutorials, these “lectures” are recordings of lecturers and their digital materials such as slide presentations and video clips. Referred to as rapid e-Learning by practitioners, i-Tutorials have the potential to make greater instructional impact to help students improve their understanding of the subject matter. This is particularly so for students who find it difficult to understand the modules (less interactive). Through i-Tutorials (more interactive) lecturers can demonstrate processes online, in a systematic fashion; progressively show how something works or how a mathematical equation is solved. Here, learners can view the instructions step-by-step and listen at the same time. The greatest advantage is when i-Tutorials are delivered by lecturers who are more effective than their f2f tutors.

Video conferencing, although not new, is a new addition to OUM. Video conference sessions are actually graduate seminars between the tutor and students on the main campus and students in selected learning centres around the country where tutors are not available. The videotaped sessions are called i-seminars due to the interactive nature of the sessions. These can be later viewed by students.

Table 1 summarises the latter description of efforts by OUM to increase the effectiveness of learning and teaching for a variety of situations. Figure 1 illustrates the richness in interactivity and dynamism of the various instructional formats or technologies used to support individual, small group or large group learning. As described earlier, the primary modes of learning for every course at OUM are: print modules, f2f tutorials and online learning. With the additional instructional media or resources, it is possible for example, to have students taking science courses with laboratory experiments to be provided with an additional multimedia courseware on CD. And, for mathematics courses, students are provided with i-Tutorial lessons through the learning management system to enhance their understanding.
Table 1

The Support of various Modes of Learning through various Print and Electronic Technologies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode of Learning</th>
<th>Format/Technology</th>
<th>Instructional Media/Resource</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual or Self-paced</td>
<td>Self-instructional print module</td>
<td>Printed text</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>i-Weblet</td>
<td>Web-based learning objects</td>
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<td></td>
<td>i-Tutorial</td>
<td>Video and audio streaming</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Multimedia courseware</td>
<td>CD-ROMs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Online forums</td>
<td>Learning Management System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Group</td>
<td>Group discussions (during f2f tutorials)</td>
<td>Physical classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large Group</td>
<td>f2f tutorials</td>
<td>Physical classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online forums</td>
<td>Learning Management System</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

One interesting question to ask is, “What do OUM part-time tutors feel about the appropriateness of blended learning for students?” In a recent survey among 31 lead tutors (senior tutors who are selected to help with tutoring aspects in the respective OUM regional and learning centres), they expressed that OUM’s blended learning is suitable for ODL learners. The reason is that blended learning enables students to do self-learning, especially at their own pace and within their own time. As working adults, blended learning is effective because it provides the flexibility that most learners need. It provides continuous interaction with learners while helping them to improve their ICT skills. The lead tutors recommended that blended learning become a mode of learning implemented by other higher learning institutions to enrich learning. The group also felt that blended learning is about more meaningful learning, as it is supportive of the principles of adult learning, that is, andrology. They find learning more interesting and stimulating. The lead tutors, however, recommended that more face-to-face meetings would be preferred for quantitative subjects such as mathematics.

As Bates and Poole advised, there are several key elements of quality in teaching with technology. These are:

- Content
- Course or program planning
- Instructional design
- Media production
- Support and moderation of the learning experience
- Student administration
- Course or programme evaluation and maintenance
Subsequently, at OUM, apart from the faculties that determine content, two centres are entrusted with the development and implementation of the blend of learning media. These are the Centre for Instructional Design and Technology (CIDT) and the Open Distance Learning and Pedagogy Centre (ODLPC). While instructional designers at CIDT work with subject-matter experts to design, develop and produce content, ODLPC trains faculty and tutors on how to support the learning experience of students via the various instructional media or resource (see Table 1). Both centres also assist with the implementation by monitoring and collecting feedback to their products or training, respectively, for continuous improvement.

Another centre that obtains feedback from students on their satisfaction with various services provided by the university is the Student Affairs Centre. Typically, the latter administers surveys among students and passes the analyses on the performance of students in the respective courses or programmes to the respective faculties.
Challenges and the Way Forward

No matter how rich a media is in supporting learning alone, the human interface is necessary. Hence, OUM’s greater challenge in ensuring successful learning is to have effective tutors who can deliver within the context of OUM’s blended learning environment. As many are from other institutions of learning, many are familiar with “teaching” in the conventional way. To ensure that OUM tutors are effective, ODLPC designs training in such a way that new tutors understand what open distance learning is, what adult learners prefer, how best to support adult learners and how best to manage f2f tutorials as well as online forums.

When a survey among OUM’s lead tutors were conducted, they perceived that not all tutors have understood OUM’s unique blended learning environment. They advised that it is important to be selective when identifying tutors for the first time. It is essential that they are able to manage both the f2f and online learning environments. Tutors must be able to interact well with OUM learners especially in the online discussion forums. Tutors must be committed to tutoring in an ODL environment. In short, they must adapt themselves to what is expected of them as an ODL tutor at OUM and this requires more than one training session.

The OUM lead tutors suggest that OUM provides continuous training in the form of refresher and short-term courses in learning and teaching. This is to assist OUM tutors in adapting to tutoring at OUM. Training should go beyond the regular sessions organised for new tutors at the beginning of every semester. Follow-up training should be conducted and tutors performance in class and online should be monitored to help them become more effective. This process should be a continuous effort. OUM also needs to focus on tutors who have difficulties in f2f and online tutoring. In addition, more hands-on training especially in online tutoring is suggested.

Besides imparting tutoring skills for blended learning, the lead tutors also suggest that OUM organise professional seminars for tutors to explore best practices in the ODL environment. In addition to these formal sessions, OUM should introduce more opportunities for tutors to interact among the newer and senior tutors help promote OUM’s unique blend of learning and teaching.

It was also suggested that OUM acknowledges its tutors by providing opportunities to participate in activities conducted by OUM to boost the morale of the tutor. This form of appreciation prompts tutors to be more committed to OUM.

For OUM to achieve pedagogical richness, tutors need to be able to provide the learning links, primarily when learners engage themselves in a self-learning mode. As various instructional media or resources are being made available for the courses, tutoring in an ODL setting requires the tutor to not only promote but also reinforce how best students may use these resources. While the initial challenge is to identify suitable tutors and train them, monitoring is the next important process. In addition, OUM needs to consider additional ways to improve tutors knowledge and skills in tutoring in an ODL setting. An
added challenge is to sustain the tutors. This is an ongoing effort and OUM needs constant feedback on how OUM tutors are progressing and how students adapt to the various forms of blended learning. Nevertheless, satisfying learners and supporting their needs through pedagogical richness is considered one way towards greater effectiveness in producing learning.

References


Biodata

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