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Open and Distance Learning Systems for People with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the idea of Open and Distance Learning Systems as a possibility of alleviating the problems faced by persons with physical disabilities and who are unable to obtain meaningful education at educational institutions due to their disabilities. The use of radio and television as a way of providing non-residential home-based education is also discussed. The two systems presently operating in South Africa and Zimbabwe are examined and recommendations for the implementation of such systems throughout Africa are made.

Introduction

Many African countries such as Mozambique, Angola, Somalia, Burundi, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Zaire, Uganda, Eritrea and Ethiopia have at some point in the last two decades experienced civil wars which have left many of their citizens maimed or physically disabled. There is enough evidence to show that many of these war victims who have had the desire to improve their education by attending school or college have been unable to do so due to a lack of proper facilities such as wheelchairs which would make their mobility to the educational institutions less difficult.

There is also ample evidence to show that it is often those persons with hearing and visual impairments who seem to have enjoyed the patronage of programmes and facilities provided by governments or church organisations in most African countries. There are many institutions that provide services for these categories of impairment: for example, Emerald Hill School for the Deaf and Morgenster Mission School for the Blind in Zimbabwe; the United Nations Institute of Special Education in Uganda and the Kenya Institute of Special Education (both of the latter which offer facilities to the visual and hearing impaired and mildly mentally retarded).

Persons with physical disabilities, although catered for to some degree, do not seem to enjoy the same specialised programmes as those in the two categories mentioned above.

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According to Bila (1996: 34) disability in Africa is often explained in terms of superstition. For instance if a child is born without limbs, the general belief is that the parents must have offended the gods of the land or ancestors, or the child must have been bewitched by jealous people or those with a grudge against the family.

These beliefs do not help the situation as parents might begin to think that it is pointless trying to educate such a child. They also make it difficult for parents to accept professional counselling services. No doubt, all parents expect a normal and healthy child, but when a child is born with disabilities, most parents fail to cope due to limited knowledge about how to accept and rear the disabled child.

For the purpose of this paper, persons with physical disabilities are those who have special difficulty in carrying out activities which non-disabled persons can expect to carry out normally.

Persons with physical disabilities will, no doubt, also experience academic, social and emotional problems. According to Kirk (1972), people in this category comprise heterogeneous groups with varying disabilities, each with a unique problem which limits the effectiveness with which the person can cope with the academic, social and emotional expectations of the school and community. For example, a physically disabled person who is unable to walk without technical support or the assistance of someone else is unable to cope with travelling long distances to academic institutions if he or she wants to improve his or her education.

It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to discuss the idea of open learning systems and distance education as possible methods of providing home-based education to those with physical disabilities.

What is Open Learning?

Many people have heard about The Open University or The Open College, perhaps without bothering to find out the ideas behind such concepts. An Open University is a non-residential university where provision of usually adult education is on a part-time basis by means of correspondence courses, radio and television programmes and supported by a tutor-counselling service at regional centres.

The idea of Open University was first mooted in Britain where such an institution was established in 1971 at Milton Keynes. The University is open to anyone regardless of previous qualifications, age, or school attended. Open University gives those who did not have the chance to undertake a university education early in life, the opportunity to do so.

On the other hand, Open College, again an idea mooted in Britain in 1987, is a non-residential educational institution that provides open learning courses towards

vocational and technical qualifications (not necessarily degrees), supported by radio and television. Open learning is therefore the provision of nonresidential education through the use of media such as radio and television.

What is Distance Education?

Perraton (1992), defines distance education as:

> *"...an educational process in which someone removed in space and/or time from the learner conducts a significant proportion of the teaching."*

His definition also embraces programmes in which some face-to-face education is linked with work at a distance. It also embraces work that uses a variety of different educational media such as print and broadcasting. Distance education has always been known as a cost-effective method of teaching those who are unable to attend regular educational institutions.

Although there is no clear-cut difference between Open Learning Systems and Distance Education, as can be seen above the two systems are not the same and can be combined for effective use by those persons who are unable to attend regular school or college.

It is with this in mind that the idea of setting up open and distance learning systems throughout Africa for the benefit of those with special education needs, in particular those persons with physical disabilities, is being mooted.

In South Africa and Zimbabwe such systems are beginning to take shape. While the Open Learning Systems in South Africa is already at an advanced stage, distance education is also making steady progress in Zimbabwe. Before the two systems are looked at separately in these two countries, it must be noted that although both radio and television are available in many African countries, many African educators have for many years distrusted the use of such technology as a way of educating their students (Zindi & Aucoin, 1995). This has been a stumbling block. The perception on the part of traditional educators has always been that open learning systems or distance education are second rate to face-to-face interaction.

However, given the modern trends in open learning systems design and technology which now address internal efficiency and the intrinsic quality of studying from home, there is now a need to seriously look at the possibility of using these systems, not only for the able-bodied, but also for those with physical disabilities as they are unable to attend ordinary schools.

Examples of how open learning systems and distance education are functioning in South Africa and Zimbabwe, respectively, are given below.

Open Learning Systems in South Africa

In 1992, South Africa saw the inception of OLSET (Open Learning Systems Education Trust) which was established as a result of increased use of radio for educational purposes by people who could not afford to pay high fees in schools or those who saw it as an alternative means of obtaining meaningful education which would have otherwise escaped them.

OLSET now finds itself on the cutting edge of innovative creative education by providing a series of daily Interactive Educational Programmes which are broadcast nationwide on South Africa Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) regional broadcasting services.

Programmes such as English in Action (EIA) are increasingly becoming very popular, to the extent that even in schools where face-to-face interaction is the order of the day, teachers have begun to target specific days and times which are used for radio learning programmes such as EIA.

It is only in the past five years that South Africa, although more technologically advanced than most African countries, has seriously looked at the problem of including programmes aimed at the least advantaged members of their communities. With the introduction of Interactive Radio Programmes which are broadcast daily, subjects such as English as a Second Language are now easily accessible to all including those who are unable to attend school due to physical disabilities.

In the past people who wanted to improve their education but could not afford to go to school used print material and audio cassettes and the occasional radio programmes. Today, hundreds of thousands of children and adults now use OLSET's daily programmes to their advantage. In some rural areas where there is no electricity, battery-driven radios are used. Statistics have shown that almost every South African has access to radio (Naidoo, 1996). It is because of this accessibility that open and distance learning strategies have been identified by OLSET as arterial routes to alternative but effective practice for the majority of South Africa's disadvantaged groups.

The English in Action broadcast seems to be the most popular programme throughout South Africa. According to OLSET's 1996 survey, primary schools in the Eastern and Western Cape provinces, Northern Cape, North West, Northern Province, Mpumalanga, Kwazulu/Natal, Free State, Gauteng and even Swaziland and Lesotho are tuning in to English in Action programmes, while hundreds of thousands of adults and other children who do not attend school are also thrilled to have access to free education.

Distance Education in Zimbabwe

In an address given by Edmund Garwe, the Minister of Education in Zimbabwe (in October 1996), it was agreed that emphasis should be made on the need for a new technological thrust in the development of distance education. With assistance from the Zimbabwe-Canada General Training Facility (ZCGTF) – a linkage programme aimed to assist in the development of education in Zimbabwe – the technologies which were put in place in addition to existing ones include:

- text and graphics design for instructional materials using desktop publishing as a means of producing effective and motivating instructional print materials;
- interactive radio instruction which provides an audiovision interactive link between the instructor and learners through the use of radio and cassette recorders; and
- production of education video materials.

In the past, distance education institutions in Zimbabwe relied on traditional technologies such as the print media and the radio only, but due to the advancement of computer technology and educational video equipment, instruction and learning through distance education have also changed to include this new technology, even though this is still limited.

The Government Correspondence Primary School in Zimbabwe is probably the only school in the whole of Africa that gives distance education at primary school level. Plans were underway in 1996 to equip it with audio-visual conferencing and computer-based communication technologies and to expand its functions to include on-line access to distance education literature around the world and to turn it into Zimbabwe's Distance Education Document Centre.

The University College of Distance Education (UCDE) was set up in 1992 after the William Commission's (1989) recommendations (on the expansion of university provision) in order to respond to increased school enrolment. After Independence (1980) the school system began to churn out at least 7,000 'A' level graduates yearly who had university-entry qualifications, yet only a third of these students were absorbed by the four universities in Zimbabwe. Given the shortage of university places on the one hand and the quest for a university education on the other, distance education became the alternative for most of them. However the initial mode of instruction at the UCDE is the print media which is principally in the form of modules and study guides but also supplemented by face-to-face tutorials, residential sessions, audio cassettes and video cassettes. Although plans

are underway to introduce new technology such as audio-conferencing, and computers, the desire to keep distance education affordable in a country where tuition fees are determined by salaries (one has to work a whole year to afford a decent computer) has been the main reason why the University College of Distance Education's advancement in technology has been limited.

The Government Correspondence Primary School which is getting assistance from the Canadian government will, no doubt, expand its distance education technology base to include upper primary education programmes and perhaps pre-service teacher training programmes such as the Zimbabwe Integrated National Teachers Education Course (ZINTEC) programme which provides trainee primary school-teachers with distance education materials.

According to Garwe (1996) the future role of the Government Correspondence Primary School apart from the functions already outlined above, will be to provide efficient and effective distance education at primary school level up to Grade 7 and to other distance education providers under the Ministry of Education. It is therefore a matter of time before the ZINTEC programme begins to benefit from the new technology at the Government Correspondence Primary School.

Currently, ZINTEC – which was initiated in 1981 in order to meet the increased demand for teachers (after Zimbabwe attained Independence) when primary school became free and compulsory – still follows teacher training methods through distance education for two main reasons:

(i) the programme is cost-effective when compared to the conventional teacher education programme; and

(ii) it is the fastest way of producing more teachers since after only 16 weeks' attendance of a residential programme, the students are sent into the field to effectively take classes while the rest of their training continues through distance education. They only return to classes during the final year where another 16 weeks' residential course and examinations are undertaken (for details of ZINTEC programme, see Chivore, 1992).

The ZINTEC programme today still follows the traditional technology of print and the radio. Radio 4, which was established immediately after Independence (1980) – mainly for educational broadcasts – is quite popular among distance education students. No attempts have yet been made to make television another media for regular distance education programmes, perhaps due to the fact that there is only

one channel that operates over the whole country and another that caters for the Harare area only – and also coupled with the non-existence of televisions in most of rural Zimbabwe where there is no electricity. Distance, education, no doubt can also be an effective method of educating those with physical disabilities, depending on the degree of disability.

Conclusion

Governments in Africa should now wake up to the fact that open learning systems and distance education can go a long way in alleviating the problems faced by persons with physical disabilities in their efforts to improve themselves academically. As it is often said, *"disability is not inability."* Given the right environment and proper facilities, most, if not all, persons with physical disabilities can fulfil their educational goals. It is therefore recommended that the two systems of Open and Distance Learning should be adopted throughout Africa in order to assist those with physical disabilities.

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