

Lifelong Learning: Issues of Effective Implementation

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Abstract

Lifelong Learning is becoming more important as the median age of the world and the pace of change continues to increase. It has become part of key national development strategy to update and upgrade the knowledge of its citizen to meet the challenges of globalization. This paper reviews the goals and process of lifelong learning, which may be academic or non-academic, pre-employment or post-employment, formal, semi-formal or informal. It then examines the deployment of modern information communication technology (ICT), and its effects of accelerating the life-long learning process. Among the modes of delivery, the authors contended that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) with blended mode of delivery is perhaps the most effective means of implementing lifelong learning. The issues of assessment and accreditation, especially the validation and recognition of informal learning remain one of the main obstacles to the implementation of lifelong learning.

Keywords: *Lifelong Learning (LLL), Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Information Communication Technology (ICT), Adult Education and Learning (AEL)*

Introduction

Lifelong education and learning involves the provision of education and learning to individuals throughout their life according to their needs and inclusive of formal, informal and other studies (UNESCO 2011). The global knowledge economy is transforming the demands of the labor market throughout the world. It is also placing new demands on its citizens, who need more skills and knowledge

to be able to function in the day-to-day lives (WBR 2003). Equipping people to deal with these demands requires a new model of education and training, a model of lifelong learning.

A lifelong learning framework encompasses learning throughout the lifecycle, from early childhood through retirement. It encompasses formal learning (schools, training institutions, universities); non-formal learning (structured on-the-job training); and the spectrum of informal and incidental learning available in a multicultural learning society, where theory- and practice-based approaches are recognized (skills learnt by self, from family members or people in the workplace and community). It allows people to access learning opportunities as they need them rather than because they have reached a certain age.

Lifelong learning is crucial to preparing workers to compete in the global economy. By improving people's ability to function as members of their communities, education and training increases social cohesion, reduce crime, and improve income distribution.

Developing countries and countries with transition economies risk being further marginalized in a competitive global knowledge economy because their education and training systems are not equipping learners with the skill they need. To respond to the problem, policy makers need to make fundamental changes. They need to replace the information-based, teacher directed rote learning provided within a formal education system governed by directives with a new type of learning that emphasizes creating, applying, analyzing, and synthesizing knowledge and engaging in collaborative learning throughout the lifespan (WBR 2003).

1.1 - The Four Pillars of Lifelong Learning

The Delors Report (Delors 1998) presented to the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century proposed the four pillars of lifelong learning: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be.

Learning to know is to acquire the instruments of understanding. This is accomplished by acquiring broad knowledge and the opportunity to work in depth on a number of subjects. Learning to know also means learning to learn, so that the learner may benefit from the opportunities education provides throughout life. Learning to do is to be able to act creatively on one's environment. This is to acquire an occupational skill and the competence to deal with many situations, individually and in teams. This also means learning to do in the context of various social and work experiences which may be informal – local or national, or formal, involving courses, alternating study and work. Learning to live together is to participate and co-operate with other people in all human activities. This is achieved by understanding other people and appreciating interdependence, through carrying out joint projects and learning to manage conflicts, in a spirit of respect for the values of pluralism, mutual understanding, tolerance and peace. Learning to be is an essential progression which proceeds from the previous three pillars. Learning to be is to develop one's personality and be able to act with ever greater autonomy, judgment and personal responsibility, without disregarding one's potential, including memory, reasoning, aesthetic sense, innovation, creativity, physical capacities and communication skills.

The four pillars of lifelong learning were reaffirmed by the Belen Framework for Action during Confinte VI in 2009 (UNESCO 2009a).

1.2 - Adult Learning & Education and Lifelong Learning

The definition of adult learning and education, as described by the Hamburg Declaration in 1997 (UNESCO 1997), denotes “the entire body of learning processes, formal or otherwise, whereby people regarded as adults by the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, and improve their technical or professional qualifications or turn them in a new direction to meet their own needs and those of their society. Lifelong learning “from cradle to grave” is a philosophy, a conceptual framework and an ongoing principle of all forms of education, based on inclusive, emancipatory, humanistic and democratic values; it is all-encompassing and integral to the visions of a knowledge-based society. Adult learning and education is a significant component of the lifelong learning process, which embraces a learning continuum ranging from formal to non-formal to informal learning (UNESCO 2009).

Lifelong learning is therefore not just adult learning and education, although lifelong learning will invariably include adult education as the learner’s age increases. Lifelong learning encompasses adult learning and education which starts once the individual leaves the formal school system at the age of 16. (Bochynek 2010). It is also imperative that adult literacy is the foundation of adult learning and education, and hence literacy is a prerequisite for lifelong learning. Figure 1 shows the relationship between lifelong learning (LLL), adult learning and education (ALE) and Literacy.

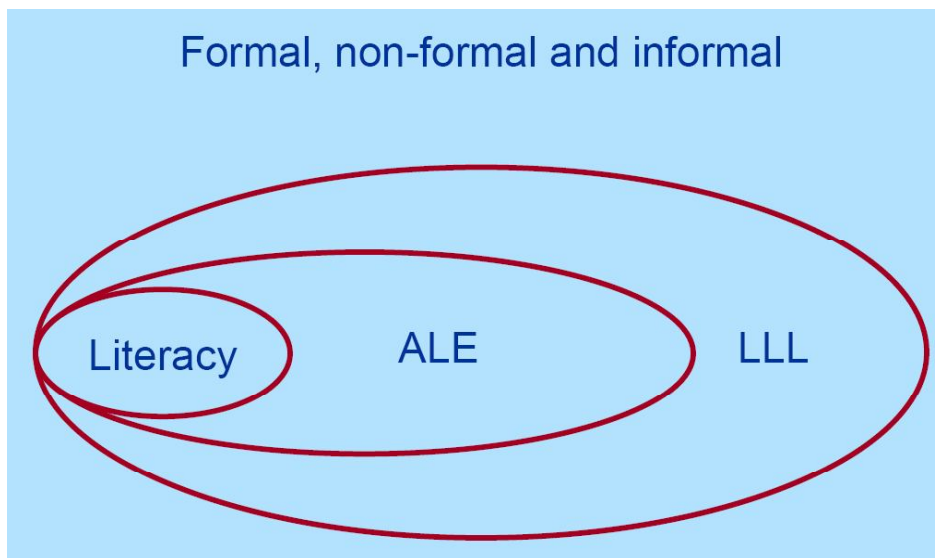


Figure 1: Relationship between LLLL, ALE and Literacy (Bochynek 2010)

1.3 - Lifelong Learning at the Workplace

Continuous training of employees has become a standard human resource development (HRD) practice in most organization. The training may be conducted in the form of formal classroom training by in-house or external trainers, specialized external or informal on-the-job training. The justification of the investments in the employee learning are often related to the employee’s skill improvement, alignment to the organization’s strategy and processes, achievement of the productivity targets or confirmation to the quality standards – all related to the improvements to the organization’s performance.

Pate (2000) has found that investment in HRD through company-based programs of lifelong learning pay dividends to companies in terms of knowledge transfer from courses and more positive psychological contracts, i.e., individual's beliefs about the mutual expectations and obligations in the employer-employee relationships, the components of which include fairness, trust in management and the extent to which the "deal" is delivered.

The key principles of lifelong learning at the workplace are: (a) A continuous and wide-ranging commitment to learning for all employees, (b) Ensuring that education and training become a normal and accessible aspect of all employees' careers and (c) Placing employees at the centre of the learning process (McGoldrick, 2002) (Rainbird, 1998).

ICT and Lifelong Learning

Before the availability of information communication technology (ICT), lifelong learning is delivered in the traditional way via classroom instruction, correspondence programs and on-the-job training. With the introduction of networked computers in the 1980s, online facilities with self-managed learning become available. The rapid development of Information Communication Technology (ICT) over the first decade of the millennium has changed the scenario of the mode of delivery of lifelong learning. Personal computers (Desktops PCs and Notebooks) are becoming affordable, new hardware such as tablet computers and smart-phones offers mobility at lower cost. Sophisticated communication infrastructure enables seamless wireless broadband internet to all types of devices.

Learners have the choice of applications such as browsers, email, instant messaging, voice and video conferencing (Skype), social websites and twitters to participate in the learning process or access contents online. The contents, many of them free, include dictionaries, encyclopedia (Wikipedia), e libraries (ebooks), training sites (Khanacademy) and courseware (MIT's open courseware).

ICT has the following impacts on lifelong learning: (a) Reduces the cost of provision of learning, (b) Distance is no longer an important issue, (c) Makes learning open and available.

The development of ICT is progressing at increasing pace. Table 1 shows the increasing rate of proliferation of ICT. Note that although the telephone took almost 89 years to reach 150 million users in the United States, the cellphone took 14 years, and the social networking website facebook took only 5 years. This is the result of the advances in ICT itself, the progresses in modern industrialization and globalization, which together make the world smaller and faster.

Table 1: The Race to the Mass Market

ICT Product	Year Introduced	Year Reached 150 Million Users in USA	Number of Years to Reach
Telephone	1876	1965	89
Television	1928	1966	38
Cellphone	1983	1997	14
iPod	2001	2008	7
Facebook	2004	2009	5

Source: Fortune Magazine, 2 March 2009

As ICT permeate our societies and communities, the role of the individual learner is highlighted. Globalization has produced outcomes and processes which make the learning of new skills and competences of paramount importance. It is no longer enough to have the same living and working skills one had five years ago. Learning to learn, problem solving, critical understanding and anticipatory learning – these are only a few of the core skills and competencies needed for all, at a time when 60% of trades and jobs to be performed in the next two decades or so are not yet known (Quane 2001).

ODL and Lifelong Learning

The availability of modern ICT facilities has enabled many educational institutions to incorporate online distance learning (ODL) programs in addition to their traditional undergraduate and post-graduate programs via centres of open learning, centers of professional studies or centres of continuing education. Some universities, such as the University of Southern Queensland in Australia, have been so successful in their ODL programs that the number of open and distance learning students far outnumber their on-site students. There are also universities which offer exclusively ODL programs with an online-only mode and a blended learning mode incorporating self-managed learning, face-to-face tutorials and online interactions. Examples of these universities include Open University of Malaysia (OUM), Asian eUniversity and Wawasan Open University. (Ali 2005), (Raghavan 2009), (Ahmad 2001), Adam (2009). Figure 2 shows the blended learning delivery mode in use at OUM.

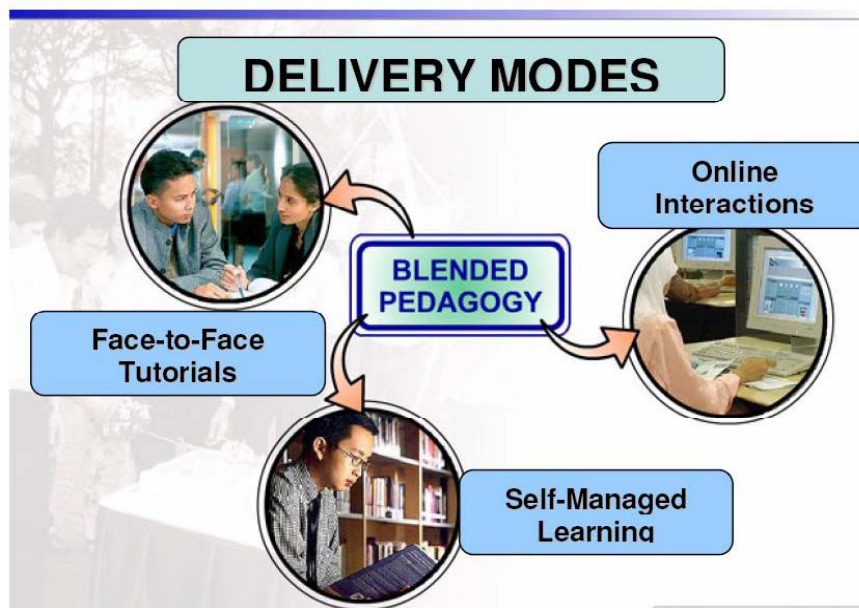


Figure 2: Delivery modes at OUM (Ali, 2005)

ODL has the following features:

- Flexible – Learner can manage their learning according to their own schedule.
- Economical – The main cost of learning is face-to-face instruction, which requires human resource, classroom facilities and travel time and expenses for the learners, trainers and administrators. Blended learning mode generally reduces face-to-face instruction time to about one-third. Online mode totally eliminates the face-to-face instruction time.
- Borderless – Through the internet, learning is available anywhere in the world.
- Acceptable learner experience – The learners are adequately guided through their learning.

ODL has the following challenges:

- Acceptance – Employers are still skeptical of qualifications obtained via online programs. To overcome this concern, the following techniques are used to provide about one-third of normal face-to-face instruction to the learners: (a) Blended mode with several seminars per module (b) Block mode with one block of seminars over several days (c) Residential mode with seminars at the end of each year.
- Learning Attitude – Many learners, especially the more senior adult learners and those with time-demanding jobs, have problems in self-managing their learning.
- ICT Facilities – ODL assumes that the ICT facilities are adequate and efficient and the learners are adept in using ICT.

In a recent study, Adam (2009) has found that integrated use of blended learning involving face-to-face teaching, digital media and digital communication with simple navigation between the content items leads to positive student perceptions. This is in contrast to negative student perceptions in situations where learners must navigate in online learning, and where there is no face-to-face instruction.

Latif (2009) investigated learners' ability, experiences and perceptions of using ICT in their learning and their impact on e-Learning in an ODL institution which deploys a blended mode of instruction, and found that ICT skills and usage are medium to high and there is ample room for improvement. Although receptions towards the use of ICT are generally positive, traditional face-to-face methods are still desirable. The findings auger well for the blended mode of learning adopted.

Raghavan (2009) reported how the ODL may be employed as an approach to provide and expand education, capacity and human resource development opportunities through cross-border education. Through international collaboration, the emerging needs of global learners are met, bringing opportunities for enormous economic growth and development.

Issues and Challenges

The issues and challenges of lifelong learning include the following:

- **Literacy**
Literacy is an indispensable foundation and prerequisite that enables young people and adults to engage in learning opportunities. Without the adequate basic level of literacy, it is an unseemingly task for the learner to acquire additional skill.
- **English Language**
Although the use of mother-tongue or national language is important, competency in the English language will give learners a definite advantage because much of the modern educational materials are developed in English. Translating the material takes time and lost in precision of the content. Training of the instructors will increase the cost further. Another consideration is the timeliness and the obsolescence of the material.
- **Poor Participation**
Mazanah (2001) identified poor participation – due to access problems, location, opportunities, work commitment, attitude of employers as the key issue affecting lifelong learning in Malaysia. The learners need a lot of incentives and personal commitment to overcome this problem.
- **Lack of Training Resources**
Mazanah (2001) identified lack of learning resources - qualified trainers, training facilities and teaching aids, as another key issue. The lack of professionalism and training opportunities for educators and the inadequate learning environment in terms of equipment, materials and curricula, has shown to have a detrimental impact on the quality of adult learning and educational provision (UNESCO 2009a).
- **Lack of Structure, Policy and Funding**
The lack of structure, policy and funding has hampered the implementation of lifelong learning process. UNESCO (2009), Ali (2009), Mazanah (2001)
- **Assessment and Recognition Issues**
Due to the vast variety of lifelong learning and the way these are acquired, it is extremely difficult to formulate a uniform and creditable assessment process to evaluate the quality of the learning. Unless this is established, it will be impossible for the employers to give the deserving recognition to lifelong learning qualifications obtained.

Ali (2005) suggested that there must be a full recognition to lifelong learning via the recognition of prior learning, including those who continue to learn after their initial schooling and even after college days. The assessment and accreditation system of each country must recognize that this reality and only through this change in the mindset that the nation can develop fully its human potential.

Conclusion

The goals of lifelong learning had changed from improving the economic status of the population to the re-learning to adapt to changes in job requirements, globalization and other needs. The advances in ICT have improved the delivery of the lifelong learning. Online and ODL have been proven to be both effective and efficient learning modes for formal university level learning. Literacy, English language, poor participation, lack of training resources, assessment and accreditation are issues and challenges to lifelong learning.

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