RENEGOTIATING THE TUTOR-LEARNER RELATIONSHIP: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Keynote Address by the Deputy Minister of Education Malaysia

Introduction

Distinguished guests, tutors and academics, ladies and gentleman. It is a pleasure to be invited to deliver a keynote address to OUM's first colloquium on ODL tutoring.

Since OUM's inception in the year 2000, student enrolment numbers have risen substantially, as have the number of tutors, academics, and programs. By the end of 2003, it is expected that student numbers will rise from 12,000 to 17,000. The number of programs will increase from 13 to 20, and the number of part-time tutors are expected to rise from the present 500 to 600.

Clearly, open and distance learning, or ODL in short, while relatively new in Malaysia, is fast gaining popular acceptance as a 'non-traditional' mode of accessing higher education. As the numbers multiply, however, so too the challenges confronting us – challenges that compel us to continually reassess our position and

options. Here I would like to touch on 4 major areas, namely Knowledge, Technology, Performance, and Pedagogy.

First, on knowledge: How do we, educators and learners alike, keep up with the rapid production of new knowledge? Bear in mind that the global knowledge base is estimated to *double* every three years, and that education these days only represents a shrinking sample of what might be studied.[1]

Second, on technology: How do we utilise new educational technologies to make a difference in ODL *without* running the risk of depersonalising teaching and learning? How do we alleviate the prevalent 'loneliness of open and distance learning'?

Third, on performance: How do we ensure that the democratisation of higher education through ODL is succeeded by the production of graduates who are able to perform at the workplace beyond the level of regurgitation? Note that employers these days are placing increasing emphasis on performance. Employers are looking for graduates with the skills to function in unfamiliar real-life work situations – "an ability that is increasingly in demand with the current rapid expansion of knowledge and the changing needs of society."[2] These

skills include the ability to use the appropriate technologies for processing information, to be analytical and to think conceptually to solve workplace problems.

Lastly, on pedagogy: Giving these issues their full weight, how do we reconceptualise teaching and learning in the context of ODL? What should the tutor and the learrner reasonably expect from one another? Is it feasible to hold on solely to the 'teacher talk, students listen' approach? If the answer is no, how then do we build a culture that places value on personal inquiry, critical thinking, and flexible self-directed learning?

The issues I have identified are not exhaustive. But they give us an indication of the unique challenges facing higher education today. Far from the sole concern of university professors and policy-makers, I believe that the issues should be the concern of every educator, learner, and stakeholder. And I encourage you — tutors, academics, and learners at OUM — to critically reflect on them in relation to your own daily practices.

Opening Up the University

Ladies and gentlemen,

In order to fully grasp the rapid changes taking place in higher education today and their impact on ODL tutoring, allow me to begin by putting the matter in its larger context.

For the longest time, the university was confined to a territorial space. The institution of the lecture was the primary form of communication, and the solitary scholar the agent of knowledge. The university was the exclusive domain of a small segment of the elite which produced, organised, consumed and controlled knowledge.

As times changed, the university evolved and became less elitist and absolutist. In the 1960s and 1970s, students and educators alike became more and more committed to social causes, bringing the university closer to society. A major change occured in the 1980s when the university forged an alliance with industry. The university began to move in the direction of the global market. Structural changes in economic and social systems required a better qualified workforce.

This, coupled with innovations in ICT, and the continuing focus on issues of access and equity by governments and social movements, led to the massification of higher education. Study opportunities were opened up to more and more non-traditional, under-represented groups: women, ethnic minorities, part-time students, and working adults.

These sweeping changes paved the way for the rise of open and distance higher education. In geographically-challenged regions, and in countries like Indonesia, Kenya, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, and Pakistan, pre-service and in-service teachers have been successfully trained by the thousands. Improved subject mastery and teaching competencies have been documented.[3]

Today there are over 1,000 institutions in 107 countries offering nearly 40,000 courses in ODL mode[4]. In Myanmar, for example, 60 percent of the student population study in ODL mode. In Asia, there are more learners studying in ODL mode than anywhere else in the world.[5]

Learner-Centredness, Behaviourism, and Constructivism

As we know, ladies and gentlemen, the uniqueness of ODL lies in its *learner-centred* approach. To bridge the separation between teacher and learner in time and space, ODL course materials are designed from the learning standpoint, rather than from standpoint of the general audience. Course materials, which replace conventional lectures and textbooks, usually incorporate structured instruction, self-assessment questions, exercises, activities, and sample answers. They can be reviewed and revisited by learners at their own pace and convenience, whether at home or in the workplace.

The benefits and advantages of ODL are clear, but there is always room for improvement. One crucial area that needs to be addressed is the charge that ODL's learner-centred approach is simply not learner-centred enough, that it lends itself to rote learning and a depersonalised learning experience.[6] Course materials might be too tightly structured and standardised to cater to the needs of different learners. Instructional design might be over-reliant on *behaviourist principles* which do not particularly promote meaningful learning. Without the proper support, e-learning technologies might alienate ODL learners, especially those who perceive technology as a threat. As well, ODL tutor might not be sufficiently aquainted with

contemporary pedagogical theories to be able to apply them to foster deep learning.

It is widely acknowledged in ODL that there is a need to depart from behaviourist thinking.[7] There are, I believe, good reasons to do so.

As is well known, in behaviourist paradigms, knowledge of the external world is conceived as singular and fixed, existing independently of the perceiver. 'Truth' and 'authority' – whose existence is taken as justification for their continued existence – are not to be challenged but accepted without question. Based on that belief, the goal of behaviourist instruction is indoctrination, to increase and reinforce the number or strength of 'correct' learner responses. Learning, which is teacher-directed, is assumed to have occurred when the learner consistently gives specific, observable, and desired responses to questions posed by the teacher.

The obvious shortcoming of behaviourism is that the learner is treated as a passive receipient of knowledge. There is no emphasis on prior experience, cognitive development, critical thinking, and real-life problem-solving. Behaviourism neglects to take into account the fact that the learners' unique needs, perceptions and experiences matter. It also overlooks how learners –

particularly ODL learners who are mostly working adults – learn most effectively when new information is connected to and build upon their prior knowledge and real-life experiences.[8]

Against behaviourism, a cognitivist approach like constructivism insists that learning is a process of constructing and reconstructing meaningful representations through reflection and abstraction. Learning is conceived as a process of making sense of one's experiential role through schema-building. The aim of teaching is therefore not to indoctrinate or to trasmit a fixed body of knowledge. The aim is rather to facilitate learners' acquisition of the necessary conceptual tools and metacognitive skills for self-directed learning.

Another interesting aspect about constructivism is that it aims to provide learners with the opportunities and incentives to build up a broad base of reflected knowledge which learners can then apply to more advanced classes. It requires learners to work more independently, creatively, and actively than in conventional settings. It gives learners opportunities to draw from their own experience and interpretations in matching instruction to their own realities for any given situation. And it encourages them to learn through sharing and collaboration with their course-mates.

Theory into Practice

Ladies and gentleman,

If we agree that constructivism is the way to go, how then do we put its pedagogical principles to work in ODL? How indeed do we facilitate constructivist learning? Much has been written on this subject, which is unsurprising considering how constructivism is widely regarded as 'the most significant recent trend in education relative to the dynamic relationship between how teacher teach and how learners learn'.[9]

Still, integrating constructivist principles into teaching is a little more complicated than theorising these principles. Consider a recent study by a research team from Australia, the US, and Hong Kong.[10] With regard to the 17 tele-tutorials analysed by the team, it was found that tutor-tutee interactions:

> displayed very few characteristics of constructivist pedagogy. Most of them comprise mainly one-way traffic of information being dispensed by the tutors in the "traditional" banking view of teaching . . .

In the warmth of delivery and in the many emphatetic expressions of the tutors, however, there is fuel for the suspicion that the tutorials might have been very much more constructivist in nature had the tutors known what was possible, how to engender it, and how beneficial to students it would have been. Ignorance of constructivism is likely to be the main explanation of the inability or reluctance of tutors to conduct what were labelled as "tutorials" but were, in effect, largely monological mini-lectures.[11]

Ignorance of constructivist theory is not the only hurdle in implementing constructivism in ODL tutoring. Tutors may be unwilling to shift the responsibility for learning to students. They may find it difficult to do so, or may be worried that their ratings might drop.[12]

As well, learners accustomed to having teachers tell them everything they need to know may not necessarily like having this support withdrawn.[13] They may not appreciate innovative pedagogy which requires them to do the work in learning. They may not be receptive to collaborative learning and sharing with their tutorial mates, in case they help them get better marks. Their target of coming to tutorials may be to get a passing grade in the shortest

time possible, not how to learn better or to change their way of thinking.

Interestingly, in a recent study conducted by the Open University of Hong Kong, it was found that *lecturing by the tutor was clearly the mode most preferred by learners.*[14] The same group of learners indicated that the most important reason for attending tutorials was *to listen to tutors explaining the course material.*

Other reasons OUHK learners attended tutorials were:

1. To receive guidance from the tutor on assignments, study skills, and examinations;
2. To get some psychological support from the tutor and other learners;
3. To get the feeling of belonging to a group; and
4. To make more friends.

The OUHK findings are not unlike studies conducted by the Open University in the UK, or OUUK. Eight out of ten learners who were interviewed indicated that they preferred a well delivered lecture, with an opportunity for student questions.[15]

Although a similar study of learners' need at OUM would be instructive, I believe that the expectations of these

OUHK and OUUK learners are not too far off from the expectations of OUM learners. From learner feedback, it is apparent that assignments and examinations are high on learners' priority list. Some learners even expect their tutors to give straight lectures.

Knowing this, however, does *not* mean that tutors should be content with the transmission of knowledge in the dogmatic sense. Why?

Again, the OUHK study is instructive, for it shows that although learners initially had a strong preference for receiving lectures from tutors, more of them started to consider it important, as they continued with their studies, to discuss the subject matter and share their experiences with others.

It is interesting to note that these learners' change of heart was due in no small measure to their tutors' effort. The tutors are made aware, in staff development sessions and materials, that tutorials should be participatory events, not straight lectures. They employed a mix of learner-centred approaches which required learners to actively participate in learning.

There was, in the initial stages, a mismatch between the tutors' approaches and the learners' original stated

preferences. In the face of this, one might expect low learner ratings of their tutors. Instead, the OUHK study found that 75% of the learners considered their tutorials to be 'excellent', 'good' or 'satisfactory'. Excellent tutorials had the following characteristics, in order of significance:

1. They help learners to understand the course content;
2. They help students to do assignments;
3. They are interesting;
4. The tutor requires learners to discuss the topic; and
5. There are many opportunities for learners to participate.

Although learners' expectations for tutorials were maintained, their preferred tutorial approaches had changed. They now preferred those tutorials which provided opportunities for them to participate.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen,

The lesson to be learned here is crystal clear. A concerted approach to constructivist ODL tutoring has to be adopted which blends together self-managed learning, face-to-face meetings, and online learning. Only then, I

believe, will our learners graduate the necessary skills to boldly face the challenges of the 21st century.

Over this weekend, you will have the opportunity to deepen your understanding of ODL tutoring. You will also have the opportunity to relate ODL tutoring to the 4 key issues I raised earlier. Experts in the field will share their insights with you, as well as the finer points to look out for in negotiating the tutor-learner relationship. You will also have the opportunity to share your thoughts and concerns in a collegial environment.

As a prelude to that, and to conclude this keynote, I would like to leave you with a quote which I hope you will find useful as you learn and share your experiences with this weekend.

I quote:

> It is impossible to be a teacher without also being a learner, that in order to be a teacher it is first necessary to abandon the position of the 'the one who knows', recognising both one's own lack of knowledge and of self-transparency and mastery and that one's own learning is never, and never will be, complete.[16]

Unquote.

Thank you, and have a productive and enjoyable weekend.

[1] Spanier 2001: 111.
[2] Taplin 2000: 279.
[3] UNESCO 2002.
[4] Reddy 2000.
[5] Shive & Jegede 1999.
[6] See Tenebaum 2001, & Haque 1999.
[7] Jonasssen 1991.
[8] Spigner-Littles & Chalon 1999, in Tenebaum 2001: 90.
[9] Lunenberg 1998, in Tenebaum 2001: 88.
[10] Tenebaum 2001.
[11] Tenebaum 2001: 97.
[12] Little & Ryan 1988, in Taplin 2002: 279.
[13] Taplin 2000: 279.
[14] Fung & Carr 2000: 41.
[15] See Fung & Carr 2000: 44.
[16] Usher & Edwards 1994: 80, in Slattery 2000: 144.

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