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TAKING THE DISTANCE OUT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION THROUGH THE MEANS OF MLEARNING

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Abstract
How do you react when you receive a *short message system* (sms) from the university where you are enrolled? You probably would feel excited to be part this new adventure called learning, which is described by Lusunzi (1998: 1) as "The success of the beaming process is increasingly measured by the high number of satisfied customers and low number of drop-outs, and not pedagogical imperatives"
"A course is much more than a package of study materials....they (the learners) must be supported in various ways. They may be distant from their teaching institution, but they must not be isolated" (Dhanarajan: 1996).
The aim of this article is to determine if learner support through the means of mLearning will help the learner to feel less alienated and to see how sms's can be best implemented in the Distance Education environment so that it is beneficial for all learners.
One of the most effective means of support in the distance learning environment is to make contact with the learner, anything that will bring the lecturer and the learner closer together where there could be a "meeting of minds" (Lusunzi, 1998: 7). As these students struggle to cope with all this information as well as the demands of learning by a distance they come to realize that they need help, so much so that without intervention they might drop out(Molefi: 1999).
Through the support of mobile devices the learners' throughput rates might be improved and the quality of the learning experience enhanced. Active learning might immerse where previously inactive studying took place.

Introduction

Beep! Beep! - This all too familiar sound that resonates in malls, on city streets and even during movies. It is the sound of billions of Sms's that criss-cross the globe each year, carrying with them the hopes, dreams, ambitions and emotions of billions of people that are flexing their thumbs to send these text messages.

Why can't we as educators use this to start our own "flirt net" or a "cupid learning net"?

In doing so we might enhance the learning experience for all, but especially the distance learner.

How would you react when you receive a *short message system* (sms) from the university where you are enrolled? You would probably feel excited to be part this new adventure called learning, which is described by Lusunzi (1998: 1) as "The success of the beaming process is increasingly measured by the high number of satisfied customers and low number of drop-outs, and not pedagogical imperatives".

Enrolling at a distance education institution is much more than just studying and "a course is much more than a package of study materials....they (the learners) must be supported in various ways. They may be distant from their teaching institution, but they must not be isolated" (Dhanarajan: 1996).

"Right in the middle of every distance education system is the student. It is for this person that we, collectively, come together to conceive and create course materials, scheme out ways and means of having it delivered, prepare challenges to test if learning outcomes are being met and finally celebrate the success of the students as well as the teaching/learning venture" Dhanarajan (1996: 1).

Accessible support emerge here as one of the key factors. The better support there is for learners and the easier they can have access to it the less likely they will consider dropping out. "Those unhappy on either count were almost three times as likely to think of leaving" (Richards: 2005).

As the distance education student struggles to cope with all this information, as well as the demands of distance learning, he or she comes to realize that they need help, to the extent that, without intervention, they may well drop out of studying (Molefi: 1999).

Student support can counteract the feeling of alienation

The student's success and the success of the institution depend not only on the quality of the learning package that was sent to this student, but also on the quality and scope of the support that the student is given.

Academics can make a huge difference. "Mature and first-generation students often lack academic confidence, so feedback is essential." Students become frustrated if they feel alienated and "those who had not made new friends were more than twice likely to consider dropping out" (Richards: 2005).

Students receive study packages that are sometimes well designed and sometimes not very well designed. The lecturer simply does not always know how they (the students) react to these materials. Where does the learning begin? During enrolment very little is done to prepare students for the interaction with their study packages. As a result, once they have received their study packages in the post, students are on their own. Molefi (1999: 2) says that the student faces different kinds of isolation or distance. These are

- social
- psychological
- economic
- cultural (context of learning and way of life)
- geographical
- communicative (feedback is delayed)
- distance created by differences in knowledge:
    knowledge the learners have
    difference levels of knowledge between tutors and learners
    different levels of knowledge held by the institution itself - that is, about what services it provides and the knowledge learners have about the services available to them.

Interactive study packages take the distance out of learning
Distance education should therefore also be designed to resolve this problem of alienation. "Providing correspondence education with minimal support is not a way to help..." (Knox: 1999). As a result, some distance education institutions have established departments specifically for this function.

One of the most effective tools is the development of high-quality interactive study packages for students. Packages that take the distance out of learning through activities which bring the lecturer and the learner closer together where there could be a 'meeting of minds' (Lusunzi, 1998: 7).

To facilitate learning in such a way that students will reach the goals they set their minds to, a distance education institution, according to Molefi (1999: 3), should:

•	help its students by minimizing the effect of isolation
•	minimize the dropout rate
•	help students deal with the institution and augment the package of course materials
•	improve the students' learning experience
•	provide extra assistance for weaker students
•	provide counseling for those with personal difficulties

The *Institute for Curriculum and Learning Development* (ICLD) at the University of South Africa (Unisa) is involved, on a daily basis, in developing study materials/study guides. They think that the following principles are important when a study guide is being designed:

A curriculum relevant to the student's needs

A curriculum is more than legislation. It is more than a descriptive way of packaging learning content. It should be in touch with the student's world: his/her beliefs, interests, culture, individual differences, goals, where the student lives and the experiences he or she has. Relevance means using examples relevant to the world of the students and, for example, not telling them about Heathrow Airport if an example of their own taxi-rank is adequate and is something they understand. Relevance therefore means: "for the intended target group".

Competency-based student-centered learning materials

If the student becomes the most important person in a learning experience, then he or she should not be a 'dumping ground' for content. Authentic tasks should be designed in order for students to illustrate their competencies. Here they should be able to demonstrate their problem solving skills that are based on the real world in which they live.

Accessible language usage

Language usage that is easily understood does not mean a lower level of language usage. It only means another register - where these diverse second language students understand all the words that are being used.

Interactive study material

SAIDE (1999) says: "Appropriate use of activities in learning situations encourages learning by **doing** as opposed to the memorisation of facts. Activities provide immediate feedback on the students' learning progress....In addition, they allow for the sharing of students' prior experience and interpretation of issues being

learnt". These activities can be questions, short exercises, review questions and assignments.

Communication between many stakeholders

Communication among all the parties involved becomes even more important in a distance education situation than in a face-to face institution. To minimize the student's feeling of isolation (already discussed) it is very important that there are good communication channels not only between the lecturer and student, but also between the student and tutor and the student and his or her peers.

Du Plessis & Van der Merwe (Undated) states that the first principle for good undergraduate education is student-lecturer contact. Rixon (1985) says that "telephone tutoring led to increased interest in the subject studied". These days we can also use e-mails, text messages, discussion classes, discussion forums, chatrooms and many others. We need to explore text messages to help us here as 82% of Unisa's students have cell phones and 100% have access to a mobile phone.

Properly trained tutors and counsellors, who are thoroughly familiar with the study material, can help these students studying at a distance not only to survive, but also to complete their studies successfully. Interactivity between these two parties also means that an institution should provide sufficient student centres where students can study, get access to technology and those practical requirements asked for in the study package. Lusunzi (1999) says: "distance teaching should be an innovative and stimulating process in which the learner and the tutor are equal and symbiotic partners".

Learning also takes place by discussing the learning materials with one's peers. Study groups, paring of students that live close by, and even exchanging cell phone numbers, supports the learning process immensely, not only because of the interaction and distribution of ideas and opinions, but also because it benchmarks the learning content between the group and individual learners (Rixon: 1985).

Throughput rate

Many tertiary students find distance education as a method of studying very difficult indeed. According to Rixon (1985), dropout rates can be as high as 50 percent after 12 months and as many as 10 % may never submit an assignment. At Unisa it takes the average student nine years to complete a degree and only about 15 % persevere to the end.

Turnaround time

Prompt acknowledgments of students' admission and enrolment, prompt material delivery and easy access to resources, as well as fast responses to queries, fast assignment turnarounds with positive, supportive feedback are all directly linked to

students' throughput rate (SAIDE, 1999: 3). Holmberg (Rixon: 1985) notes "that there is a distinct correlation between turnaround time...and course completion". Text messages might prove to be a valuable tool in future to use in this regard.

Mobile technologies and learning
When we look at the very diverse distance education learners in the South African, or per se within the African, context we wonder what these learners have in common. The answer is a mobile phone. This is the one handheld device that can be used successfully to reach some of the most distant and disadvantaged learners. According to Attewell (2005: 2) "There are estimated to be 1.5 billion mobile phones in the world today. This is more than three times the number of personal computers". This is also the easiest of all the mobile devices to master. According to Attewell, about 62 % learners are enthusiastic about mobile learning and they are keen to take part in future learning, after they have tried mobile learning. Many of these learners might never be able to afford a personal computer but they are very likely to own a mobile phone which will become their "digital life" (Attewell, 2005: 2).
"It is within this context that m-learning can contribute to the quality of education. It offers opportunities for the optimization of interaction between lecturers and learners and among members of communities of practice" (Brown: 2004).
Using a cell phone to enhance learning is practical because almost all learners have access to one, to either send or receive a text message. It is also a relatively cheap method. At Unisa it costs about twenty two cents to reach a learner by sms through the University's Learning Management System (LMS).

The Technology Enhanced Learning Research Centre in the United Kingdom (Attewell, 2005: 13 & 14) made the following key observations:
Key observations

   ✓ **Mobile learning helps learners to improve literacy and numeracy skills**
Even though the learners were only involved in mobile learning for a short time, the research centre reported improvements in their reading, writing and arithmetic skills.
   ✓ **Mobile learning can be used for independent and collaborative learning experiences**
Some of the learners preferred to work independently, as they felt under no pressure, and could do it in private, where with a computer; everyone could see

what you were doing. Others welcomed the opportunity to work in a group because they could assist each other with the mastering of the technology of the devices.

✓ **Mobile learning helps learners to identify where they need assistance and support**

The research centre reported that as a result of participation in the m-learning projects the learners have not only developed greater confidence in current reading and writing abilities but have also sought help to improve mathematical skills from local Adult Basic Education Centres.

✓ **Mobile learning helps to overcome the digital divide**

The research centre further reported that a number of learners within the group who had previously avoided using a computer where now keen to try, and as their confidence grew their skills were also enhanced to such an extent that they helped their peers.

✓ **Mobile learning helps to make learning informal**

Because familiar games such as **PlayStation** and **GameBoys** were used the learners felt comfortable to engage with each other and it also kept their interest levels high.

✓ **Mobile learning helps learners to be more focused for longer periods**

The learners were observed to be very calm and focused during the sessions when they were given the devices to use.

✓ **Mobile learning helps to raise self-esteem and self-confidence**

Allowing learners to personally take responsibility for the care of the devices made them feel trusted and it helped to build their self-esteem. Another boost for their self-esteem where when they realised that as experienced users of mobile phones they possessed useful skills which were perceived as important. It was also observed by the research centre that there were changes in the learners' level of general self-confidence and it improved their skills in working with others. They were willing to take risks and they tried new things.

Implementing mobile devices in the learning experiences

In Africa the wireless future might not be as spectacular in the learning context as it is in the business world, because of student's funds and access to available resources. This does not mean that educators should not start to get the ball rolling.

 They should:

- Develop materials specifically designed for cell phones and learning and should not try to re-use materials designed for computers.

- Registration forms should be revised to capture all relevant information such as cell phone numbers, and if the students are prepared to have their privacy invaded by text messages from the institution.
- Mobile learning should already be included in materials at the curriculum phase and not added on in the end.

If sms's seems to be too tedious as it takes longer to type and only a couple of characters can be used, then other methods should be researched. Options such as the "voice-in-demand" option used in Israel for certain religious groups who are not allowed some technological devices.

The way forward

It is important for mentors and facilitators to stay involved and to be enthusiastic at all times to ensure successful mobile learning.Institutions need to make time for training. A training needs analysis is very important for these mentors and facilitators, as mobile literacy and confidence varies.

Training as well as ongoing access to advice and proactive support in the beginning will be helpful for mentors. Fast responses to the students' problems are crucial to avoid disillusionment with the mobile devices used. Proactive support encourages the mentors to also be more proactive and it will help to identify issues before they become serious problems (Attewell, 2005: 17).

Conclusion

"Most institutions concur that distance education students need proper support structures to give them confidence and enable them to work properly" (SAIDE: 1999). Through support learners' throughput rates might be improved and study packages opened earlier so that the learning experience can start sooner. Active learners might immerse where previously inactive studying took place.

The aim of this article was to determine if learner support through the means of mLearning will help the learner to feel less alienated and to see how sms's can be best implemented in the Distance Education environment so that it is beneficial for all learners, not only by sending a sms as a reminder or as encouragement but also for lecturers to invite learners to send a sms summarizing their reflection on the learning experience.

Richards (2005: 1) says: "We need to build strategies into our institutions that better fit the students we have, to support their retention and success".

Mobile devices in the hands of the distance education learner can be used, now and even more so in the near future, to engage the learner in the learning activities

that might "change their attitudes to learning and thereby contribute to improving their skills, opportunities and their lives" (M-learning: 2005).

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