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MULTICULTURALISM AND LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES IN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROGRAMS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

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This paper evaluates the effectiveness of the use of learning technologies in Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) programs at the University of South Africa (UNISA). Since 1946, when UNISA became a distance education provider, the University has included the use of various technologies such as print-based study guides, radio, audiocassettes, and CDs, as well as traditional printed notes and textbooks. UNISA has also added videocassettes, telephone teaching, computer-based audio-graphics systems, fax, videoconferencing, email, the internet, and computer-based multimedia in the teaching and assessment of its learning programs (including ABET). The demand for these technologies has been necessitated by the multicultural profile of the University's students. The paper examines the value of this range of technologies. In the South African context, the "low tech" options are much more robust and are used effectively to provide support for a diverse range of learners.

Keywords: Multiculturalism; distance education; learning technologies; Adult Basic Education and Training.

1. Introduction: Multiculturalism and Learning Technology

Cultural tolerance and acceptance of cultural diversity are the basic principles of multiculturalism in educational discourse. In schools, learners are drawn from different racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. As the learners attend school in similar contexts they are "expose[d] to different cultures, where their respective cultures are accepted as valuable educational resources" (Gumbo, 2001, p. 234). At the University of South Africa (UNISA), the term "multicultural" is used to address all those learners who are registered at the University, but are scattered all over South Africa, Africa, and the rest of the world. These learners come from

diverse cultural backgrounds and have diverse prior experiences with learning technologies. At UNISA, learning through technology in multicultural contexts requires the use of diverse forms of media that are available in those communities. Finding suitable or appropriate learning technologies is a major challenge to distance education providers such as UNISA. Van Soest, Canon, and Grant (2000) suggested that the use of learning technology should combine "cultural diversity and social justice content" (p. 465). Having worked with some students in a web-based forum, the trio argued that the web can enable learners to be critical of their peers' ideas and values in a way which might not be possible in a face-to-face learning context. The web-based forum helped "students open themselves to difficult course material by providing a safe vehicle for student dialogue" (Van Soest, Canon, & Grant, 2000, p. 465).

Online learning may facilitate a number of learning opportunities such as encouraging discussion of contentious issues such as racism, social injustice, and xenophobia, ensuring a speedier response in delivering feedback from teachers to learners (and vice versa), and promoting a culture of questioning and challenging received knowledge without fear of reprisals. As an example, Schoorman (2002) effectively used email in communicating with learners from very different social and cultural backgrounds. Vogel, Genuchten, Lou, Verveen, van Eekhout, and Adams (2001) tracked interactions between students in Europe and Asia who were working collaboratively online and noted the progressive growth of intercultural understanding and professional development. There are a number of similar examples which show that technology can be used effectively with widely dispersed students.

2. The South African ABET Experience

The University of South Africa, founded in 1946, is a distance education provider. The institution uses multiple technologies to cater for its learners who come from different social backgrounds. Adult education takes place in social contexts that are influenced by different economic, cultural, and physical factors. While some adult learners have access to computers, email, and internet facilities, others do not. This situation needs to be factored into learning technology design and course planning in ABET programs. For example, broadcasting through radio or television, in conjunction with local provision of tutors and counsellors, can be a most effective way of reaching groups that might not otherwise be reached. Learners in rural areas without electricity can tune in to broadcasts using windup radios.

In ABET study programs, using learning technologies includes being sensitive to the values, ideas, and cultural beliefs of the learners. Kemp and Dayton (1985, p. 47) noted that the use of more than one instructional medium might encourage active learner participation during learning. In selecting media for teaching and learning purposes, the chief criteria should be the availability of and access to the media and their instructional potential. Since no two media convey learning content in the same way, each medium modifies the message it conveys in its own unique

way. We agree with the overall spirit of McLuhan (1974, p. 16) who says that in the use of learning technologies "the medium is the message because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action."

The integration of various media such as textbooks, study guides, face-to-face teaching, radio broadcasts, audiocassettes, and films should practically provide appropriate stimuli for desired responses to engage all of each learner's senses and intellectual faculties. The Department of National Education ABET policy document (1997) clearly supports the notion of integrating various media in a more flexible curriculum that allows a wide variety of approaches to materials and media. The policy document on ABET contends that "an integrated and open approach will also allow a wide variety of approaches for materials developed to tailor learning and support materials to their institutional context and learners needs" (p. 36).

3. Media and Technology in South African Rural Communities

The rural areas of South Africa suffer from poor infrastructure. We believe that it is in these areas, more than any other, that adult education driven by a multimedia-enhanced delivery approach can have a fundamental impact. McKay, Kotze, Vacarrino, and De Necker (1998, p. 8) reported that 48% of South Africans live in rural areas. This situation is not peculiar to South Africa. It is a general trend in most of the so-called third-world countries, particularly in Africa. These rural people who live and work in scattered areas need to be empowered through education. As noted by McKay *et al.* (1998, p. 287), "the empowerment of people by means of knowledge can be enhanced by using the mass-media which are the most powerful tools of communication known to humankind." Three examples now follow to illustrate this.

3.1. *Radio*

Unfortunately, due to the lack of electric power and paucity of computers, televisions, and videoplayers, rural learners are disadvantaged. As they do not have access to "big media," teachers mostly depend on print, radio, audiocassettes, CDs, and the human medium in teaching adult learners in the rural communities. Citing the *Soul City* evaluation report of 1995 as an example, McKay *et al.* (1998) mentioned that approximately 92% of the South African population have access to radios. This indicates that small, portable, battery-operated transmitter radios and windup radios, supplemented by a small number of face-to-face tutorials, could be the best possible way of reaching out to the majority of learners who live and work in the rural areas. Radio can impact on rural learners through formal and non-formal teaching about health issues, agricultural strategies, and pest control techniques. Although it is a very powerful medium for teaching and learning, radio alone may not always be suitable for all learners in the UNISA ABET context. The UNISA ABET program comprises adult learners who work in the formal and informal sectors of the economy, and so transmission times may not always suit them. Also, sometimes, changes

in frequencies of the transmitter may not be known to students and they may miss a particular slot. This situation justifies the use of different technologies in order to meet the learning styles and needs of all students enrolled on the ABET courses.

3.2. *Video*

Let us consider teacher education. By "bringing the lecturer" to the classroom (through a video lesson on teaching methods) students can learn the skills in lesson planning in terms of the kind of activities which the teacher and learners should engage in at the various phases of a lesson. The three main phases of a lesson — introduction, presentation (learner/teacher activities; assessment and duration for each activity), and conclusion — may be fully emphasized by a video presentation. The video teaches students the appropriate way to introduce a lesson in order to capture and focus learners' attention on what is to be taught in each phase of a lesson. It also indicates and discusses with students the kind of teaching aids that might enhance learners' understanding of a lesson.

During face-to-face tutorials, tutors may use video triggers for discussions on lesson planning. An example is the video titled *Thami learns her lesson* (UNISA, 2001). In some of the rural areas where there are too few students to constitute a tutorial center (there must be 15 to 20 students to form a class), students can form their own study groups where the video can be played and its content and that of the study guide discussed. This integrated approach enhances learning more than using just the written text.

In urban and semi-urban contexts where educational materials and electricity may be available, relevant videos on the topic can be used as teaching aids. The intermittent disruption of electricity supply in many parts of the country in recent times, however, is a serious constraint to the use of electronic media.

The type of teaching and learning technology employed by the UNISA ABET tutors depends on the context of learners and the availability of resources. For example, in some rural environments, teaching aids may be improvised by the tutor. In these contexts, newspaper cuttings, or pictures relating to the topic, and/or the environment in general, can be used by the tutor to make lessons real and enhance learning.

3.3. *SMS*

Another important learning technology which is increasingly employed by lecturers, tutors, and students on the distance ABET programs at UNISA is short message services (SMS) through mobile phones. Every year after registration, the names, addresses, student numbers, and their mobile phone contact details (as indicated on their registration forms) are given to all tutors appointed to the various tutorial centers throughout the country and even beyond. In the same way, mobile phone numbers of tutors are given to all registered students. This enables tutors to relay information on tutorials (date, time, venue, change of dates or time, and what

module to bring along to tutorials) to all registered students both in the rural and urban areas through the use of SMS. In a case where a tutor cannot attend tutorials, she informs the students and the coordinator through SMS in time, so that arrangements can be made for another tutor to provide tutorials on that particular day. The use of the mobile phone as a teaching and learning technology is very effective in the UNISA context because the various brands (Vodacom, Cell C and MTN) have good coverage and make it possible to reach all registered students. Most mobile phones are relatively cheap and over 90% of students possess their own, or have access to, mobile phones. The cost for communicating through mobile phones is cheaper after 8 pm South African time. A text message of about 20 words to or from a student could cost less than R3.00 (USD 0.60).

It must, however, be pointed out here that the availability of a mobile phone should be backed by the ability or skills to operate it well before it can be used as a learning technology. Although in the UNISA ABET context a very high percentage of the distant students may be in possession of mobile phones, whether they live in rural or urban environments, this does not automatically make the phone a teaching and learning technology. Some adult learners are able to send SMS to tutors or their fellow learners for explanation or illustration of what they learn. However, there are those who can only receive or make calls but cannot write and send SMS messages. Thus, whether a student lives in an urban or a rural area, the lack of skill in operating the mobile phone can impede learning. The remark by a student, Onald Rangoetji: "I am unable to do banking transactions on my own" (Rangoetji, 2003, p. 14) is a pointer to the fact that not all adult learners can use modern technology effectively. This is an indicator to the fact that the use of SMS in teaching and learning may not benefit all adult learners in the ABET program.

3.4. *CDs and audiocassettes*

CDs and audio cassettes are important in the print-based distant ABET programs offered at UNISA. Commenting on the value of audiocassette in particular, Bates (1990, p. 101) appropriately argued that there are important lessons to be learned from this humble and unsung "low tech" medium which need to be applied to the more publicized "high tech" media. With the advancement in technology and its application as a medium of instruction, many distance education practitioners are likely to regard new technologies as solutions to distance teaching and learning problems without considering the needs of their learners and the type of technological medium that could be more effective in their particular context. Supporting this viewpoint, Harry and Khan (2000, p. 136) wrote:

> It is inevitable that new technologies will continue to emerge in the coming years and will be sought after for use in Distance Education. The experience of the last 20 years points to the likelihood that the fashion of the day will look upon older technologies as less desirable

> and less acceptable simply because they are older. The potential effectiveness of older technologies can easily be forgotten in the waves of publicity and advertising which new technologies receive. It is especially important in basic education that the technologies employed should be as accessible as possible, and should match as closely as possible the needs of the student.

The pedagogical value of "low tech" media, such as CDs and audio cassettes, as media of instruction in the UNISA print-based ABET context is very relevant today in South Africa. The pedagogical value of and justification for the use of "low tech" technologies is their flexibility, controllability, convenience (e.g., they can be replayed), and portability. They can provide support for different types of learners (e.g., sight-impaired learners). CDs and audio cassettes are flexible and controllable media. The learner has control over when they are started and stopped and can choose what material to select and review (Quan-Baffour, 2005). The learner can playback both media as many times as required until a lecturer's point becomes clear. Student can also pause, stop, or reverse them, and write notes at their own pace. The portability of these media allows adult learners to take them along to work or on a journey, listen to them at lunch break, while driving, or at home when cooking. CDs and audio cassettes are thus student- and not teacher-centered. It is therefore not surprising that they now supersede live broadcasts at all levels of education, especially in the developing countries.

These educational media are the means by which something is communicated between teacher and learner, and possibly vice versa (Hawkridge 1999, p. 11). They are channels through which educational texts or messages are communicated.

> Audiocassettes and CDs as educational media can be designed in such a way that they provide pauses in the instruction while the learner carries out some learning tasks before returning to them for correct answers. A well-designed CD and audiocassette can be effectively used as teaching media.
> (Quan-Baffour, 2005, p. 63)

Both CDs and audiocassettes can be integrated into print by referring the learner to sections of the study guide or a prescribed text book as she listens to them. This makes learning more interactive especially when the teacher acts as a partner, sharing responsibility for learning with the student rather than being the traditional manager of time and practice. Interactive instruction calls on teachers to demonstrate and share their expertise with students, instead of telling students what to do and leaving them to get on with it.

CDs and audiocassettes can also be used as resource material by study groups. Distance learners, enrolled for the same courses and living within the same vicinity, can form study groups, meet regularly to play, listen and discuss the contents of these media sent by their print-based distance education institution. Such regular

discussions may not only help in forming good study habits among distance learners but also offer cooperation and support needed by the "lonely" distance learner. Learning is a social activity, and by bringing learners together to listen to and discuss the contents of an auditory medium such as audio cassettes or CDs, learners may enjoy the benefits of peer mediation, tutoring, and group support. Although the lecturer may not necessarily be known to the learners or physically present, her or his voice heard in the presentation acts as a powerful medium of instruction and support that can take the distance out of distance learning.

These media of instruction (audiocassette and CD) can be used to support different kinds of learners in different ways. Slater (1998, p. 119) pointed out that most of the objects and events that we experience are multimodal, in that they provide information to more than one sensory modality. Right from an early age, we learn this way. These sound media can substitute words or supplement them, and this makes them more suitable for the visually impaired and even for sighted students who do not like much reading. As Rowntree (1992, p. 108) aptly stated: "the main benefit of sound is to reduce the number of printed words required to be read by the learner, whether these are on a page or on a screen." Thus, CDs and audiocassettes, as media of instruction, can give learners other options to reading and also provide them with new ideas that may be difficult to express in writing.

CDs and audio cassettes are very useful media in teaching language courses. These audio media are particularly effective in teaching new words, spellings, tenses, correct pronunciation of words, sentence formation, and structure. In summing up the pedagogic importance of audio materials as a medium of instruction, one can say they can be used to:

- help learners make the best use of their time by giving them a means of learning while doing other things;
- talk them through tasks such as studying a map or a table of figures, where they might find it distracting to have to keep turning aside to look at written guidance;
- help learners practice skills;
- make teaching more humane and personal;
- encourage or motivate learners;
- touch learners' feelings and attitudes;
- bring to learners the voices of people who would be unable or unwilling to say anything in writing; and
- provide "source materials" (e.g., excerpts from an interview for learners to analyze or react to).

However, these "low tech" media may pose didactic problems in the UNISA ABET context. For example, if they are not well prepared, learners cannot use them. In a mass production system sometimes lower quality CDs or cassettes may slip through

and be posted to students who may not be able to use them. Also, cassettes or CDs alone, without supplementary print media may not be effective learning technology.

4. Organization and Management of the ABET Tutorial System

CDs and audiocassettes, SMS, the internet, email, and fax have, however, not displaced the power of the tutor's voice as a learning technology in face-to-face learning contexts. The UNISA ABET Institute identifies, selects, and appoints as tutors committed and qualified ABET practitioners who live or work in rural areas. These part-time tutors might be past senior students or individuals identified by the Institute for their good work in the communities as adult educators. Upon appointment, the ABET Institute supplies tutors with all the stationery they need for their work, such as registers, files, a tutor manual, list of students assigned to a particular tutor, contact details of fellow tutors, and copies of tutorial letters and study guides. Just after student registration, the Institute uses postal codes to identify students who live within particular geographical areas and allocates them to respective tutors there. The tutors concerned contact their students through SMS, word of mouth, announcements at churches and schools, advertisements posted at post offices, shops, education offices, and, where possible, local radio and newspaper announcements. Through these various communication media, the UNISA ABET students are informed about venues of tutorials and their first meetings. At the first meeting, forms are given to all students to provide detailed contact information. These details are needed for follow-up purposes. For instance, if a student does not attend tutorials for a number of times the tutor will find out what has happened to her. At the first tutorial meeting, the tutor and students draw up their tutorial timetable for the year and also write down their own ground rules for what the group sees as accepted behavior. All students sign the attendance register before the end of the class. A tutorial may last for two hours if it is held fortnightly or four hours if it is held once a month. After tutorials the tutor writes and sends a report on the tutorials to the ABET Institute.

5. Conducting an ABET Tutorial Session: Voice as a Learning Technology

The importance of cooperative learning as a teaching method or teaching technique in adult education is based on the African philosophical thought of *ubuntu* (literally meaning humanness, oneness, wholeness, communal or team spirit). Africans, in general, lead communal lives through sharing of resources and expertise. Cooperative teaching is fashioned on the African thought that learning is a social or group activity and, when learners learn cooperatively, they realize the inputs and support of all group members. Thus, apart from the classroom learning tasks, there is the unintended or incidental learning of working together for community development.

To make tutorials more participatory and more learner-centered, the tutor randomly assigns students to groups of four to five learners. The tutor may ask students at the start of the session if they have any learning difficulty to be addressed. Each of the groups chooses its chairperson, secretary, time keeper, and reporter. The tutor assigns different tasks based on a common topic to each group of learners to discuss and find solutions. The power of the voice of the tutor is that it is aural (verbalized) and auditory (can be heard). It is through the live voice that the tutor explains the various tasks and gives specific times for completing the learning tasks. As students discuss and debate, the tutor goes round the groups and listens attentively to them. Learner groups are given some time to report their work to the class. After the groups have completed their presentations, there is a general discussion which involves the tutor and the learners. Questions from the various groups are answered by the tutor who also gives a summary of the issues discussed.

In view of the poor academic background of many students in the rural areas, tutors sometimes combine direct teaching, facilitation, and group discussion. Giving views on the use of group discussion in the teaching of adults, a student teacher remarked that group work gave her the opportunity to help and be helped. She added that ABET tutorials conducted through face-to-face group work empowered her not only to study at a distance but also how to teach adults in her class (Mongala, 2005). Another student in the rural areas of Taung, Lerato, in the second year of a diploma, had this to say about the importance of face-to-face tutorial sessions: "I like the English lessons; I need to learn how to say the words. I liked the business lessons best. Yes we learned about AIDS and it makes us scarred [*sic*]" (UNISA, 2003, p. 9). Mentioning issues related to AIDS also brings into focus the relevance of the content that the learners are taught. These positive remarks that come from students indicate that tutorials do make a difference in the life of the distance adult learners in rural areas. Indeed, while many adult learners may prefer learning technologies such as radio, mobile phones, CDs and cassettes, there are those who, in addition to these learning technologies, like to be taught face-to-face.

The power of the tutor's voice is not only in the words that are uttered, but also in the different emphases, intonations, and inflections that accompany the pronunciation and expression of certain concepts. In other words, while standing in front of the learners, the tutor exploits these extra or paralinguistic features of voice as a technology of instruction. In sum, the functions of the tutor's presence and use of voice as oral technology are to:

- present face-to-face tutorials to a group of ABET students assigned to her/him in a particular rural district. This aspect covers didactic and facilitative functions where the tutor plays a formal teaching role by explaining content and also assisting learners to explore the course through tasks;
- explain assignments to students and guide them on how to write academic essays;

- elucidate and highlight important and difficult sections of ABET study guides;
- give feedback direct to students;
- counsel/guide and motivate learners who might have problems with their studies;
- take note of students' grievances, queries, and problems regarding studies, assignments, and study materials, and report them to the Institute or appropriate section of the University for action and solution;
- market the Institute's programs to key stakeholders in the rural communities, such as non-government organizations (NGOs), literacy teachers, and community builders; and
- assist prospective students to acquire forms in time for registration. In fact in the rural communities tutors are the "face of UNISA" because information on all UNISA courses from prospective students is directed to them.

6. Use of Computer-Based Multimedia Learning Technologies in ABET Programs

One of the major benefits of multimedia instructional modes is that they enable students to develop skills through structured activities, practices, and feedback. Different media provide alternative ways to reach understanding and comprehension. In distance education, where tutor–student contacts are limited, a variety of presentation modes is essential. Computer-based multimedia can provide a very rich multimodal learning environment to serve various instructional functions including interactive engagement with learning materials, communication with teachers and with fellow students, feedback, and evaluation. As argued above, the use of computer-based technologies has great promise, but it is still quite restricted in use in the UNISA ABET context.

The key challenges to the application of all multimedia technologies in the UNISA ABET context are lack of funding and shortage of skilled personnel. British Official Development Assistance funded the program since 1995, but unfortunately it stopped providing benefits in 2004. The vagaries of aid funding will always affect developing countries. The withdrawal of funding has, to some extent, affected the activities of the Institute. However, even where funding is available, it is still necessary to have skilled people to operate the various learning technologies so that high educational outcomes can be achieved for both learners and the ABET Institute. At present, the Institute operates on very few lecturers, professionals, and administrative staff.

7. Conclusion

In this article we argued that multiculturalism is a difficult term to define with exact precision. Some authors discuss the meaning of multiculturalism in the limited context of having learners from different social backgrounds in the same classroom. However, learners in distance education do not necessarily experience diverse values,

approaches and views in the same way as those in face-to-face learning situations. We propose that multiculturalism could better be understood from the perspective of tolerance of cultural diversity in the values, feelings, views, and the actual content of experience of different learners in different cultural settings. We have argued that since multiculturalism means diversity, then its articulation or expression can readily be channeled through diverse learning technologies. In the article we have discussed the use of CDs, audiocassettes, videocassettes, SMS technologies, the tutor's voice as oral technology, radio, telephone and the written text/guide as methods of instruction in the ABET programs in South Africa. In our context, the robustness and flexibility of "low tech" technology has proved to be most effective.

We showed that these technologies have the potential to democratize access to knowledge by a diverse learnership scattered in South Africa and the world at large. We also noted that sometimes the use of these technologies by themselves does not translate to effective learning and personal growth. The main implication of these findings is that educational planners and designers of learning materials in multicultural contexts must be sensitive to the cultural values, ideological inclinations, and pedagogic appropriateness of learning through various technologies. In addition, the pragmatics of each context needs to be carefully considered. The focus on ABET learning programs revealed to us that while learning technologies can positively enhance the learning process in the context of multiculturalism, more needs to be done to further understand the relationship between technology and culture as well; indeed, to critically examine the idea of technology as culture.

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