Challenges and Strategies in Engaging Adult Learners in the face-to-face facilitation in ODL.

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Abstract

Engaging students in the classroom have become more crucial in education as the attention span of students remain the same despite the increase in learning hours. Many studies have been done on this especially at the primary and secondary level. However, there are less studies being done at the tertiary level of education. With the advancement of technology and the recent increase in distance learning and on-line learning, the number of hours dedicated to face-to-face teaching has been reduced. This means that learners have to absorb the same amount of knowledge in lesser number of hours. This study is a conceptual paper based on a literature review which focuses on how academicians can engage learners through various creative and innovative solutions. It identifies the challenges faced by academicians in teaching adult learners and explores avenues that can be pursued to engage these learners. At the end of the paper, strategies that have been successfully implemented in OUM Business School are documented as a basis for future research efforts. It was concluded that all tutors and facilitators should be committed to the development of innovation and creativity in the learning environment in order to engage learners in the classroom. This would ensure that quality in teaching and learning is achieved.

Keywords: Engaging adult learners, effective teaching strategies, innovation and creativity.

Introduction

Quality in distance learning is the fitness for purpose in combination with exceptional high standards, perfection and consistency, value for money, and transformation capabilities (Ghande, 2009). Quality means the achievement of the expected levels of knowledge and skills, which can be used as a tool for further learning in the actual work experience in the learner's life (Stanny, 2008; Ghande, 2009). Quality thus includes the quality of curriculum design, instructional materials, assessment, customer satisfaction, external and technical reviews, evaluation and validation. Many factors have an impact on the quality of ODL including the establishment of a high quality teaching faculty, quality education resources, a well-established learning assistance, strict assessment system and comprehensive monitoring approaches (Deming, 2008). This paper will only focus on quality in face to face learning in the classroom.

This focus is in line with the aim of delivering an effective, stimulating and high quality learning experience, which is crucial to any university's success (McDonald and Hall, 1996). Jarvis (2008) for example, iterated that the art of teaching is still possible in distance education through the people who design the teaching and learning process. According to him, the art of teaching lies in our empathising with the learners and thus entering into an interpersonal relationship with them. Teachers and designers have to embrace a human perspective, learn of methods, experiment with them and develop techniques using them (Jarvis, 2008).

Richardson and Newby (2006) suggested that academics and practitioners should explore how tutors or facilitators can influence learning designs and strategies in order to engage learners in their learning activities. This paper attempts to explore the avenues that can be pursued by tutors or facilitators to incorporate innovation and creativity into their teaching in the classroom.

Research Methodology

This paper is a conceptual paper that explores the avenues that can be pursued by OUM Business School to incorporate innovation and creativity in its face-to-face teaching in the classroom. A review of a range of literature related to adult learning and teaching strategies was done to collect data. From

this, strategies were recommended for face-to-face teaching amongst OUM Business School tutors and facilitators. The following framework was used as a basis for the research.

| Innovation and Creativity | → | Learner Engagement | → | Quality in Teaching and Learning |
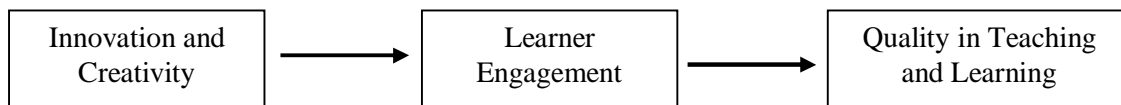
Challenges faced in teaching of adult learners

Adult learners in OUM are aged between 21 up to 75 years. Those over the age of 60 especially, may have experienced a decline in vision, a decline in reaction time, or a decline in short term memory (Poison, 1993). Lynch and Bishop-Clark (1994) found evidence that adult learners experience a lack of confidence compared to students who have just left the formal learning environment. This is rooted in their perception that they are not as well prepared as younger learners.
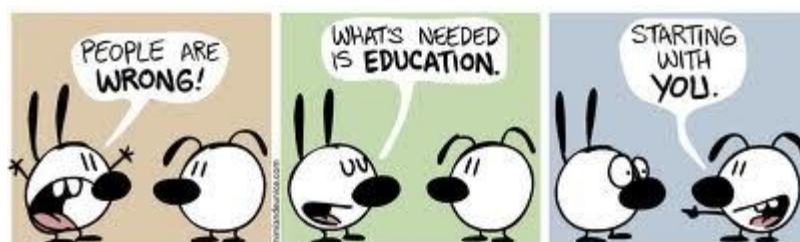
Adult learners also face time constraints in their learning as they are mostly working full time. They also have the huge task of managing work and also their family, apart from studying part-time. Thus engaging them fully in the classroom is essential to maximise their learning.

Findings and Discussions From the Literature

The most important factors under the principles of adult learning is that adults bring life experiences and knowledge to their learning experience where adults prefer to use and share their experiences in group discussion so that they will have better understanding on the topics discussed (Nor Asiah, 2013). One way of doing this would be through case studies which would enliven the class session and make them more interesting and real. Case studies would also encourage learners to integrate theory with practice. Cases can be included in the print modules but discussion may be conducted online or in the face-to-face tutorials. Use of case studies would enhance analytical techniques, appreciation of implications and increase exposure to real world problems (Gallagher, 2007).

Apart from case analysis, reflective writing can also be used to help learners become more self-directed learners. Class assignments or exercises can include prompts for reflective writing to encourage learners to think about areas that they have read. For example, "Describe the similarity between the management methods you have just learnt and those which are practised in your organisation"; and "What was the most useful thing that you learned in this tutorial?"

Another way of integrating innovation and creativity in the classroom would be to use cartoons which relate to the topic on hand. Cartoons would provide a brief respite from the monotony of theory. Figure 1 illustrates examples of cartoon that can be included in power point slides or exercises.

Source: http://mimiandeunice.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/ME_458_Education.png

"I'm inviting you to my seminar on Improving Your Communication Skills. If you'd like to attend, grunt once for yes or twice for no."

Source: http://www.glasbergen.com/wp-content/gallery/newsletter-cartoons/toon-1230.gif\

Figure 1: Samples of cartoons that can be included in slides

Besides that, enhancing the tutorial or seminars would be to add "snippets" of news from newspapers or magazines which would also act as stimulus to the learners' learning process. These can be used as a mini discussion related to the topic being discussed. A possible example is presented in Figure 2.

By THE RAKYAT POST
KUALA LUMPUR, May 15:

The search for missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 could be halted for days due to a malfunctioning acoustic communications link on the only submersible involved in the search and a broken transponder on its mothership.

CNN reported that the Bluefin-21 and a transponder on the Australian Navy's *Ocean Shield* were damaged recently when the former was being hoisted onto the deck of the latter. Quoting United States Navy ocean engineering deputy director Micheal Dean, the submersible apparently struck the navigation transponder, which extends over the side of the ship.

Although repairs were made to the submersible, operators said that during tests, the acoustic communications link on the Bluefin-21 and the navigation transponder on the *Ocean Shield* malfunctioned. If spare parts for both vessels are brought in by helicopter, it could take four or five days for repairs to be made, but if the *Ocean Shield* needs to return to port, that could delay the search for even longer, according to Dean.

Figure 2: Possible example of a snippet of news

It is also important for tutors and facilitators to be thoroughly prepared before class including preparing the correct curricula nad lesson plan. Developing adult-appropriate curricula for open and distance learning poses an even greater challenge than achieving involvement and interaction in the traditional on-campus setting (Chaves, 2009). The learning content should emerge based on learners' interest and the nature of group interaction (Susilo, 2008). In a learning community that allows for a high degree of flexibility, there should be support from teachers or experts to guarantee the efficacy of the learning model employed (Chaves, 2009). Teachers or tutors should encourage independence in the learners and motivate them them to construct their learning (Abas and Fadzil, 2008). This is especially important for OUM as Abas and Kaur (2004) found that OUM learners depended on their tutors and facilitators to ensure their success.

Another study by Abas and Fadzil (2008) recommended that tutors and facilitators should link the subject taught with real life issues pertaining to the subject matter. This view is supported by Smith et

al., (2008) who advocates the sharing of experiences through debate, critical reflections and problem solving tasks linking the subject material to application in practice. Frequent use of learners' names, humour, encouragement, frequent contact and personal examples can further improve this interaction process (Chaves, 2009).

Another element that can be added in the tutorial or seminars would be simulations or games. Ulrich (2008) cited several examples where dynamic elements were used in learning resources. Animations or interactive simulations replace static pictures in the original course content. Games can also be included to apply knowledge by hands-on training (Ulrich, 2008). Some examples that can be implemented include a business case simulation for management and human resource management programmes; and strategic games for strategic management programmes. For example, for a introduce the Boat Game to the class. In the game, learners are supposedly on a sinking boat which is about to sink in two minutes. Learners have to decide on five people who get to go on the emergency raft while the others have to fend for themselves. Here, learners will use their decision making skills while in class and the whole exercise would only take around five minutes.

This might seem simple and not up to date with technology but learners generally do not care about the technologies behind the process but they expect their communications, information and services to improve their learning within the constraints of their lifestyle as adult distance learners (Gallagher, 2007). According to Ross Gordon (2003), one approach is through creating opportunities within the classroom for students to make linkages between course content and knowledge gained in the contexts of work, family, and community living. This can be done through discussions of learners' experience at work and at home which relates to the topic being studies.

Ostlund (2008) in his study found that although learners appreciated distance learning, they found face-to-face meetings to be essential as they could communicate better this way. Learners also found face-to-face sessions to be memorable and that these sessions helped them to communicate better in follow-up online tutorials (Jakobsdottir, 2008). Face-to-face tutorials can be more interesting with the use of debates and oral presentations and seminar-type group discussions (Bruce, 1992).

Karge et al (2011) highlighted a few effective strategies to engage adult learners including think–pair-share, think-write-pair-share, problem based learning, tell-help-check- *Think-Pair-Share, Tell-Help-Check*, and *Problem Based Learning* are all engagement strategies designed to ultimately expand learning. According to them, the use of these strategies to enhance learner engagement will support any teaching environment and encourage inquiry among learners.

There are also a number of ways in which classroom facilitators can help learners compensate for the effects of aging. For example, tutors or facilitators should use large prints on overhead and printed materials, and employ both audio and visual formats (Poison, 1993) especially for those aged 50 and above.

Recommended Strategies

This section highlights some recommended strategies that tutors and facilitators can utilise in their face-to-face teaching as practised by the authors.

One way to engage learners in face-to-face tutorials is by creating variety. Variation can have a powerful effect on the audience. Even moving from the front to the back of the classroom can increase the learner's attention. The following are examples that can be emulated in OUM Business School face-to-face tutorials. These examples have been tested by the authors in their own classes and proven to be effective for enhancing learning through creativity and fun.

An effective way of introducing variety to the tutorial is to use peer teaching and learning. For example, in a Strategic Management tutorial, divide the tutorial into groups and assign each group to analyse the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities or threats of OUM. The findings of the ten minute discussion are then presented in class where the TOWS matrix is illustrated using a real-life example and learners have engaged in critical thinking. A short debate can also be held to develop learners'

research skills and encourage them to organise their thoughts in a critical or argumentative manner. Use debate when the important issues for the tutorial contain pros and cons to a particular subject matter. For an example, a short debate on "Strategic Business Units versus Matrix Structure as the better divisional structure" in Strategic Management tutorial.

Role playing is another way of making the tutorial interesting and learners more active. Role playing will increase learners' awareness of the interconnectedness of knowledge and the subtle complexities of situations. Role playing can also expand personal experience through simulation. As an example, the authors used role play to illustrate the different cultural norms amongst Americans, Japanese and Arabs in a Cross-Cultural Management class. Learners were separated into groups and given ten minutes to read the background on the assigned cultural norms and then given a further ten minutes to role play the Americans, Japanese and Arabs. Learners found the exercise interesting and managed to retain the knowledge on the different cultural norms. Often, the antics of role play result in laughter, and enjoyment which served to invigorate tired learners.

In another session, learners started off the class with an excerpt from theme song from "Rosalinda" a Spanish sitcom which their lecturer loved (good thinking on the part of the learners!). They then proceeded to portray the Spanish culture of delaying things by constantly saying "manana" "manana" (pronounced as "manyana") which means "tomorrow" at meetings, appointments and even dates!! Another unforgettable memory was a role-play in which three learners brought in actual bowling balls to the class and acted out a decision making scenario while bowling! The suspense built at the beginning of the class was sustained throughout the whole session and during the class, the learners managed to understand, analyse, build and review the various concepts involved in decision making.

Case studies can also be used to create learner engagement in the tutorials, with learners presenting their solutions to cases. This supports Gallagher's (2007) view of using case studies to engage learners. Learners will have the opportunity to develop their thinking skills and will have the chance to voice out their ideas in front of their peers. A sharing of ideas will promote a healthy teamwork within the learners and encourage them to attend future tutorials. The presentations can be either formal or informal, but formal presentation has the advantage of building confidence in the presenters and also provides them with the opportunity of showing off their skills in front of their peers. This is especially good in OUM's case as the learners are mostly working adults who can bring in their experience into the classroom. Examples of presentations can thus be in the form of chief executive officers presenting an acquisition strategy to the board, a marketing manager presenting a sales presentation of OUM programmes or an accountant presenting an audit statement.

OUM could also use the authentic experience based learning strategy for their adult learners. Under this strategy, learners use their own experience to improve their learning process (Haverita et al., 2009). Projects can be given to learners too, as long as the schedule is accommodative enough, with the expectations clearly spelt out along with a specific time frame (Haverila and Barkhi, 2009). These projects should encourage creative thinking and reflection

Another way to stimulate learner interest in tutorials is through the use of creative scenarios or simulations as suggested by Ulrich (2008). At OUM Business School, these have been implemented:
- in an Entrepreneurship tutorial, learners may be asked to simulate how they would start their own company including developing a concise business plan during the time given;
- in a Strategic Management tutorial, learners can illustrate the use of the BCG Matrix or the GE matrix;
- in an Accounting tutorial, learners can calculate the ratios or develop profit and loss statements in a given time frame; and
- in a Law tutorial, learners can present a court presentation of a chosen case where the prosecution and defence goes to trial.

Using these simulations allow learners to think and apply the concepts learnt in the print module and online learning to the "real-world" as presented in the tutorial. A simulation which stands out in the

mind of the authors is a simulation presented by learners in an economic class which went along these lines:

"Pa...please gives me some money...I need to buy some new clothes for the graduation party..." said the daughter of a Chinese man.

"Darling, darling....me also...Parkson got sale ma...I want to get a red handbag, and a blue one, and a green one......you old man but still handsome one!!!" said the wife.

"Pa, what la these ladies...shopping, shopping, shopping only...Can you just please pay for my car instalment?" said the son.

"Aiya....I die like this...I work, work, work...you all spend, spend, spend...everyday price increase, last time hundred dollars enough, now one thousand also not enough!!" sighed the head of the household...

By the end of the sketch, learners were laughing at the antics of the four learners who acted as father, mother, son and daughter. It was just ten minutes, but the learners illustrated their understanding of inflation and the whole class mastered the principles behind and the formula for calculating inflation. These are just some successful strategies that have been implemented in OUM Business School.

Conclusion

Many innovative and creative ideas have been implemented in OUM Business School. However, whatever improvements that we embark on, it is very important that we keep in mind Bloom's Taxonomy – that the process of learning and therefore, the objective of the face-to-face tutorials should be to create, evaluate, analyse, apply, understand and retain the knowledge that the learners require (Bloom, 1956).

OUM Business School should also provide training on how to integrate innovation and creativity in the learning process. This training can be conducted by experienced staff to save costs and also be a platform for the sharing of ideas and diffusion of knowledge. As a university, it is our responsibility to facilitate the learning process. As a tutor or facilitator, it is our responsibility to enhance the learning process and ensure that the knowledge imparted is retained and applied by the learners. This is summed up by Gallagher (2007) and Jarvis (2008) respectively:

Gallagher (2007, 3):

Learners want to learn; they want to broaden their horizons and they want to communicate. Simply put, they are today's investment capital; they are the means of future production and as such require access to the most effective and efficient learning available to further these objectives.

Jarvis (2008, 113):

We can help build or we can hinder the process of building full human persons by the method of our teaching – this is the responsibility of the teacher – it is more than a science – more than an art – it is the moral responsibility that is laid upon all of us who have the courage to teach.

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