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Literacy and Virtual Learning in the New Normal: Implications for Quality Educational Access in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper aims at explaining the concepts that have been added to literacy literature given the change that was brought about by the use of virtual learning. Even when the borders and management of the classroom setting have been expanded by the virtual reality, learners and instructors at all levels still have to be conscious of the guides to learning on the basis of human centredness. Literacy can be conceptualised as skills, attitude and competencies in individuals and groups of people as they relate with others in the community. The issues that are discussed are the reality of new normal and its implications for virtual learning. This discussion was done with the hindsight of what literacy was before the emergence of the new normal and virtual learning. Since curriculum development and policy formulation for implementation in learning situations may not meet up with the high demands of the virtual learning in the new normal, the paper suggests that there is need to strengthen the non - formal strategies for supporting learning in educational system. That is, in between the rigid formal system and overtly loose virtual learning there should be some sort of regulation.

Keywords: Literacy, virtual learning, new normal, quality access, and educational access

Introduction

This paper investigates the benefits of literacy in the context of virtual learning and identifies associated issues. It addresses the issues raised by virtual learning, ensuring that while virtual learning increases access to literacy, it does not compromise quality. The paper explores the benefits of literacy in the context of virtual learning and identifies associated issues. It addresses the issues raised by virtual learning, ensuring that while virtual learning increases access to literacy, it does not compromise quality. The objectives of this paper are to describe the relationship between literacy and virtual learning in the new normal and discuss both the advantages and disadvantages of the emerging learning technology. Beyond a pervasive assumption that there is no longer need for literacy, this paper reconsidered the concept, practice, issue and problem that are associated with literacy especially in the new normal and justifies the argument for adult education practices in the new normal. Literacy

demands much more attention because it is about life. Keefe and Copeland (2011) believe that a definition of literacy will open up the frontiers of opportunities to those with extensive needs for support. More so while pursuing literacy where virtual learning has improved in the new normal, there is the need to balance access with quality.

New normal and its emergence

Norm denotatively means happening that is considered usual or acceptable as a pattern. In some societies, somethings are believed to be the norms. Nickerson (2024) differentiates norms from values by definitions and examples. Norms are shared rules and expectations guiding behaviour in a society while values are beliefs that humans have about what is important. The examples of norms are taboos and laws while the examples of values are honesty and respects. From these definitions and examples one can assert that norms are practices and values are ideals which may not yet be realised by the society. So what then is new normal if in the nihilist view of Palmquist (2023) suggested that 'nothing really matters'? New normal has been referred to as a concept that emerged during the COVID - 19 pandemics to describe the changes that occurred to human lives and conditions. Before the pandemic, Martin Levey, & Cowley (2012) believed that the economic recession of 2008 created a new normal for local government administrations in the United States of America. This means that new normal can generally refer to changes that have been brought about by global events which would require persons to adjust their ways of life.

Another example of new normal was given by Carnevale et al (2015) when they wrote about the new trend in learning. They said instead of the full time financially dependent students of earlier years who enrolled for higher education there are growing working college students who have to combine work with ongoing learning. Ampousah et al (2020) also recorded this growing phenomenon and opined that there was a lack of policy that supports the phenomenon. In these instances of the pandemic, economic recession and changes in the learning, there are new normal.

The introduction and widespread use of communication devices created a new normal for virtual learning, allowing learners and instructors to interact beyond their physical presence. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, it simply increased the visibility and value of online learning by eliminating obstacles such as location, religion, and gender, among others:

In reality, the prevalence of virtual learning has generated what is now known as the new normal, allowing learners and instructors to connect at their own speed in the comfort of their homes, playgrounds, and offices. There is no doubt that studying online increases access, but it also presents certain obstacles, particularly for individuals who have become addicted users and want to replace virtual learning with face-to-face learning.

Reconceptualisation of literacy

Literacy could mean ability to read, write, count figures and become functional in the environment someone has found himself or herself. That general meaning has changed with the emergence of virtual learning which has created a new normal. Virtual learning can be explained alongside as a survival technique as it was in the event of COVID-19. Virtual learning requires ethics for its practice while the issues that surround quality have to be put in place to check the access to information.

Literacy has usually been defined within the context of Adult education but for some people the two terms are synonymous. Fordham & Fox (1989) say to see adult education as literacy is the simplest and most widely accepted concept in the developing world and, historically, in industrialised countries as well. To most African countries, the missionaries in the twentieth century brought literacy and it has produced a transforming experience, a change in the direction of equality for individuals in the society. Literacy can encompass more than only the ability to read and write alphabets, words, and simple phrases. The days of the illiterate society are largely over. Both communities and families have literate resources to draw from. The consequences of such changes in the 'literacy environment' warrant additional investigation, according to Wagner (1990).

Literacy remains a foundation and an aspect of adult education. As a foundation, it enhances other levels of literacy. Other aspects of adult education are community engagement, welfare, and workers' education. How is literacy related to these? Every skill and attitude deliberately learned for better community participation have in them some forms of literacy. Since wellbeing is never final for any person or persons, new information that improves the health and income of people are always welcome. Pract (2004) quoted Dewalt, Berkman, & Sheridan (2004) that "there is consistent evidence linking low literacy to lower health outcomes. People with lower reading levels are approximately 1.5 to 3 times more likely to have poorer health outcomes than

people with greater literacy levels. In the era of multi literacy - linguistic, digital, technological, visual, audio and spatial literacy, literacy can be described as the ability to detect, comprehend, and evaluate many types of information in an increasingly digital, information-rich, and constantly changing environment".

One of the means of enhancing virtual learning is social media platforms. Social media platforms have availed people of speedy information for health and wellness. Despite the benefits of its speed, it also has allowed for fake and unauthenticated information. Some people use the social media platforms to confuse or manipulate others. Every user of social platforms needs a lot of caution on the usage. In workers' education, training and retraining, learning is always promoted in the workplace to enhance productivity of the labour force.

Overview of literacy and delivery pattern before the emergence of virtual learning

Teaching and learning during the colonial and post-independence periods in most African countries was done with constraints of insufficient human and infrastructural facilities. Workers who needed to study in order to earn promotion and improve their work had to do that outside the workplace and countries. That situation caused a lot of difficulty in human resource development (Okia, 2012). According to Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck (2013:35) 'More and more people began to aspire to European education, notably higher education, as it became the most important channel for upward mobility in the socioeconomic and political ladder, as well as a tool for self-determination. There are ways to obtain learning in today's evolving society that do not have a detrimental impact on the workplace. Part time and weekend programmes were established to meet the need of various workers who wanted to have access to higher education. That new development with virtual learning allowed human society to attend to such problem as crisis and pandemics.

Even without such crises access to educational technologies has imposed the need for higher education administrators to be more flexible in the organization of teaching process. The problem of distance education which affected enrolment has been minimized. Earlier studies like that of Omoregie (2014) focused on the use of on line learning among workers of different educational levels, with not much attention given to the implications there are of what virtual learning for academic growth at all levels of learning has produced.

Internet enabled devices and facilities have become a necessity for every member of the society - all persons involved in any form of business and self-employment, paid workers in different work places, school children, and students in tertiary institutions of learning, and lifelong learners. Beneficiaries of virtual learning are people living with disabilities, parents who have responsibility to their children, workers on full time job who need to learn new skills for change of job and the unemployed who wish to be employed.

Some studies like Kamrajn et al (2024) on virtual learning have reported abuses among students that they hardly own the academic exercises allowing for poor quality of graduates. However, the argument of some cynics that social media are majorly for social interactions and not for educational purpose can no longer stand because education remains a social enterprise between learners, instructors and knowledge community on one hand and among learners on the other hand. Even, outside the school system, there is the vast majority of the learning community. To shut social media out of educational system could be tantamount to being too conservative while the world moved on and human behaviours have changed due to its response to the necessity of media. The social media component of literacy and virtual learning can no longer be denied though virtual learning have been identified with cheap education and so doubts exist if it could survive the quality mechanism of the operators of formal educational system on which virtual learning largely depends.

Conceptual clarification of virtual learning in the New Normal

Authors like Edwards (2007:70) noted that the term 'learning', which is now increasingly used in many texts instead of 'education,' affirms learners' significant place in comparison to the institutional form, and thus positions educational activity in an open and multi-vocal framing of lifelong learning rather than a bounded and unambiguous field of education. Virtual learning can be described as a type of knowledge dissemination where those who desire to know have access to information or the instructor in an electronic form either through audio or video interaction devices. When the resources for instruction are completely free for use without recourse of feedback from instructors, it is called asynchronous while the instructor can be directly engaged in real time synchronously. There is no free access to information without one form of cost or the other from either the seeker of the information or the provider of the information or the organisers of the interaction.

Virtual learning is made possible by different kinds of devices also used for open distance learning as Omoregie (2014) posited that some of the media technologies that can be utilized for distance and lifelong education include online forums, web content management systems, computer simulations, weblogs, web quests, e-groupware learning management systems, and virtual libraries. If virtual library is isolated from the other resources the enormity of the problem that virtual learning faces can be appreciated. For example, Koganuramath (2007) argued that virtual libraries are facing big challenges in their efforts to build a foundation for sustainable, ongoing effort.

To create a successful virtual library system, numerous components are required, including library-based open and cooperatively generated content and software, as well as centralized focused, cooperative organizational activities. Virtual learning can be described as greater than institutional virtual libraries because the connectivity by internet make users have unlimited access to the resources that are online without being restricted to what institutions can provide. Despite the facility which may be available for use, it is still important to discuss the cost of virtual learning.

Cost of virtual learning

There were so many issues that caused worries during the COVID 19 pandemic especially in Nigeria. One of the questions was who should be responsible for the appropriate device and pay for the internet connectivity for both instructors and learners. There are demands for online learning without provision by some governments. In cases where provision was made by organisations, the supports were grossly inadequate for the required usage. The cost of the devices and internet connectivity made virtual learning beyond the reach of the generality of the people who needed the learning opportunity to keep in touch with their information needs and skills development. The greatest revolution to the cost of virtual learning is Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) which are free web-based distance learning programs that are available to everyone regardless of their physical location.

Anyone who intends to take a MOOC simply logs on to the website and sign up. The courses on MOOCs could be structured on a college or university programmes. They are unlike the distance learning programmes run by educational institutions which are mainly set up as fund raising platforms for internal generated revenue for their respective institutions. The idea of MOOCs has become a great challenge for open distance learning programmes that the

cost should not be too exorbitant to the extent that it would seem as if the degrees are for sale.

Achieving quality access to virtual learning in the new normal

Educational institutions have had to struggle on how to achieve a balance between access to learning created by virtual learning and the quality of learning. The major problem could be impersonation. If learning is done online the assurance of identity could be uncertain. In this case the use of video and setting time duration remain very important during the conduct of testing. A complete online educational programme demands a more holistic method of ascertaining the identity of the learning. The following precautions can be taken: the need to appoint a course advisor, identification of a physical mentor by the agency, the use of audio and video as means of identification should be encouraged; and registration of users' device for recognition.

Course advisor for each learner would enhance constant discussion with the learner. The organising agency should appoint an adviser to each learner. The advisor serves as a link between the learner and the agency. The learner should be given opportunity to choose the advisor or at least they should be allowed to warm up to each other. It is expected that the advisor will not exploit the learner. With the rising numbers of regular in person universities all over the world, the online universities should leverage on the existing structures by allowing faculties to participate in online learning and supervision of learners on online mode. All media should be available for smooth interaction between the learner and the agency. The alternatives modes of audio and video should be used maximally for recognition and quality assurance. The computer programming aspect of device registration is also very important. The advisor should be contacted when devices are to be changed and the reasons for such decision should pass through the agency.

Virtual learning as a Survival technique

Since the COVID-19 experience, when people were locked up in their homes and teachers had to teach via distance education system because they were forced into what Butac et. al. (2022) called 'survival battles' that required students to learn remotely, write assignments, and perform in the virtual world. Virtual learning kept learning activities going in the world during the dreaded pandemics. It served as an alternative to the usual classroom engagement in the formal school system. It allowed a number of learners to obtain certificates, diplomas and degrees in various universities across the world.

Despite its role as an alternative for regular learning, Helenius (2021) referred to the period of the pandemic as a 'virtual nightmare' because it was a period when parents spent 24 hours daily in their role not only as parent but teacher, counsellor, tutor, nurse and coach. How one wishes the consequences of the virtual learning on children could be measured and cited quantitatively? From observation some students never survived the negative effect of the period on their learning.

Conclusion

The discussion of this paper is that in the era called the new normal, literacy and learning have changed their conventional meanings. At the virtual environment there are implications for non-formal strategies which should promote self-directedness for learners and human centredness of the instructors. In the virtual environment there should be a well thought out policy formulation, planning and implementation by all those who are involved in the activities of learning if it would resolve the problems of rigidity already created in educational institutions most of which are still stuck to old ways of knowledge creation and management. There is also the need to tie the loose ends of virtual learning which seems so uncoordinated by both instructors and learners. The learning space ought to be protected from every form of abuse.

Recommendations

Teaching and learning have taken different dimension from the traditional methods. The Information Communication Technology (ICT) explosion during computer age provided many devices for education. Social media developed alongside the ICT explosion. So many abuses occurred with the ICT like invasion into privacy, posting of unacceptable information and impersonation of personalities that could not be detected.

1. There should be policies that guide virtual learning and the infrastructure of the institutions need to be developed to accommodate the needs of both instructors and learners in the virtual classroom. There is the need for virtual nerve centres in universities and the neighbouring university environment as prerequisite for virtual learning.
2. Instructors should encourage learners' introductions by sharing their backgrounds, interests and aspirations in order to create a sense of community among learners. Instructors should provide opportunities for collaboration by assigning projects that require that learners work together. Personalised feedback should be provided on assignments and assessments. Learners should be addressed by their names. Virtual office

hours should be created by setting dedicated space where learners can schedule one - on - one or small group meetings with the instructors.

3. Learners should take responsibility for their posts with instructors and colleagues in group chats. Cross posting and sending messages to everyone on learning platforms except it is for announcement to the group should be discouraged in order to maximize genuine interactions with all learners.

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