FACILITATORS' PERCEIVED INSTRUCTIONAL CHALLENGES OF ONLINE FACILITATION IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) INSTITUTIONS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT
Online facilitation creates an online learning platform that establishes a new learning environment and provides multidimensional learning possibilities. This study focuses on the facilitators and perceived instructional challenges of online facilitation in open and distance learning (ODL) institutions in Nigeria. A cross-sectional survey research design was adopted. The population for the study consists of the open and distance learning facilitators in approved ODL universities in Nigeria. Three out of the six geopolitical zones were randomly selected, and one distance learning university was also randomly selected from each zone to make three ODL universities used for the study. The same simple random sampling technique was adopted for the selection of facilitators in the three universities. Two hundred and two facilitators (202) participated in the study. One research question and three hypotheses were raised. One instrument was developed, which is the Facilitators Perceived Instructional Challenges Inventory Scale (FPICIS), and a reliability coefficient value of 0.76 was obtained using Cronbach's Alpha. The data collected were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The finding reveals that the mean difference in the level of significance ($p > 0.05$) shows that the facilitators' age, and discipline had no significant effect on the perceived instructional challenges confronting online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery but facilitators' academic cadre had significant effect on perceived instructional challenges confronting online facilitation. It was therefore recommended that, in implementing online facilitation in Nigerian institutions, university management should consider the age, academic cadre,

and discipline of facilitators for them to become active participants in implementing online facilitation.

Introduction

It is a known fact that education is the bedrock of development. Nowhere in the world are people able to lift their game of development without a heavy reliance on education (Jegede, 2023). The level of development in any country is related to the level of education, and it is universally recognized that illiteracy, poverty, and low development are indicators of a low level of education. No country can develop unless its citizens are educated. Education is a key to human rights and a fundamental right of every individual in society. Besides this, every nation invests in education because of the immeasurable benefits it provides for individuals, organisations, and society as a whole. Education is the precondition for equity, diversity, and lasting peace in any nation. Access and equity to education have become imperatives to the citizenry by making education possible for everyone who is entitled to receive it. Open and distance learning has the potential of providing higher education for all and sundry while the persons remain in employment.

Open and distance learning began as a very simple concept of correspondence education (Jegede, 2021). It is a cost-effective instruction that is independent of time, location, pace, and space. It offers access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied and those who could not afford to leave their job to attend full-time conventional education. Open and distance learning as an integral part of higher education has become globally accepted because of the universal demand for higher education (Oni, 2019). (ODL) has grown into an important global strategy in resolving problems of access to education. The mode of educating people has been changing; it continues to evolve and transform society. The world has since 1728 changed from face-to-face (normal then) to E-learning (normal now) (Jegede, 2021). The use of technology to mediate instruction has been one of the factors that figure in open and distance learning practices.

Over the past two decades, the development and spread of open and distance learning around the world have been remarkable. This spread and interest in open and distance learning have been boosted and enhanced by the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic since 2020. As a result of this, open and distance learning has continued to spread like wildfire around the world. In the Education system, learning shifted from face-to-face to online facilitation in tertiary institutions, including primary and secondary schools. However, learners all over the world, particularly in developing nations, experienced a lot of challenges due to this unprecedented shift in the learning environment. Online facilitation, in a wide range of terms, can be seen as managing the learners and the learning through an online medium. Online facilitation remains a positive response to meet the needs and aspirations of the ever-increasing population of 21st-century distance learners who live in media-saturated environments (Adesina, 2020). Also, Bello (2021) described online facilitation as a veritable platform that allows seamless interaction between distance learners and their tutors. Online facilitation is an ODL instructional delivery medium that requires knowledgeable personnel with appropriate skills and the right attitude to moderate the teaching-learning process in virtual learning environments.

Facilitators are key stakeholders in online facilitation. Online facilitation is an ODL instructional delivery medium that requires competent personnel with appropriate skills and suitable attitudes to moderate the teaching-learning process in virtual learning environments (Motladi, 2014). An online facilitation environment demands that facilitators possess diverse competencies to take up multidimensional tasks. Facilitators have some major roles to play such as: assessing students' tasks, providing technical assistance when necessary, guiding and supporting learning, interacting and making contact with students, facilitating discussion, and providing feedback on student performance at any time (Esobi, Lasode, Anyanwu, Degbe, Barriguete, Okorie & Okegbe, 2020).). It is useful to note that online facilitation can never be transformative on its own; it requires facilitators/lecturers who have

confidence in its capabilities to stimulate interaction and improve students' learning outcomes.

Effective online facilitation is not just about content delivery but is about creating, engaging, interacting, and enriching learning experiences for the students. It's also not just the live session only, it includes sending e-mails, attending forums, and following up with the plans that we want to engage students with. Online facilitation has a lot of perceived instructional benefits, such as improving the ICT skills of both learners and facilitators, smoothing interaction between learners and facilitators, enabling learners the opportunity to join the class without the barrier of distance, and allowing learners to interact with their classmates during facilitation, among others. However, there are some perceived instructional challenges encountered by facilitators during the online facilitation process, which is the major concern of this study.

Statement of the problem

Before 2020, fully online delivery comprised a minority of the higher institutions' deliveries in most countries, particularly in Nigeria. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic devastated all sectors, including education, business, travel, health, banking, households, and families. This COVID-19 outbreak disrupted the education sector to the point that more than 2 billion students and youth across the planet are affected by school and university closures. Learning loss, both in the short and long term, because the measure was colossal. Learning then was shifted from face-to-face to online facilitation in educational institutions as a result of this. Learners all over the world, particularly in developing nations, experienced a lot of challenges due to this unsurpassed shift in the learning environment. The pandemic accelerated ODL and the use of modern technologies. Any technology intervention is expected to be met with resistance and uncertainty as stakeholders, especially facilitators, may be attached to the old-style ways of doing things. This study, therefore, examined facilitators perceived instructional challenges of online facilitation in open and distance learning (ODL) institutions in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were as follows:

i. To investigate the perceived challenges confronting online facilitation as indicated by the facilitators.

ii. To examine the perceived instructional challenges of online facilitation across facilitators (i.) cadre (ii.) age and (iii.) discipline.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceived challenges confronting online facilitation as indicated by the facilitators?

Hypotheses

i. There is no significant difference in the perceived instructional challenges of online facilitation across facilitators' disciplines.

ii. There is no significant difference in the perceived instructional challenges of online facilitation across facilitators' ages.

iii. There is no significant difference in the perceived instructional challenges of online facilitation across the facilitators' cadre.

Methodology

A descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The target population for the study consists of facilitators from Open and Distance Learning in approved ODL universities in Nigeria. Three zones out of the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria were randomly selected. The only single-mode ODL institution (National Open University of Nigeria) and the two oldest ODL dual-mode institutions (the University of Nigeria Distance Learning Centre (UNN-DLC), Nsukka, and the University of Lagos, Distance Learning Institute (UNILAG-DLI), Lagos were purposively

selected for the study. Simple random sampling was used to select facilitators across the chosen ODL institutions. A total sample size of two hundred and two (202) facilitators participated in the study. One instrument was developed by the researchers, namely, the Facilitators Perceived Instructional Challenges Inventory Scale (FPICIS). The instrument has two sections. Section A contained biodata of facilitators such as institution name, gender, academic discipline, cadre, and age, among others. Section B consists of 7 items that solicited information on the perceived instructional challenges of facilitators on online facilitation. A reliability coefficient value of 0.76 was obtained using Cronbach's Alpha. Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentages, mean and standard deviation, and inferential statistics (ANOVA).

Result

Research 1: What are the perceived challenges confronting online facilitation as indicated by the facilitators?

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Challenges Confronting Online Facilitation by Facilitators

	Valid Percentage				Mean		Std. Deviation
	SA	A	D	SD	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic
Poor internet connectivity from my end hinders the flow of class sessions during online facilitation	36.1	20.3	22.3	21.3	2.71	.082	1.166
Learner's inability to navigate the video conferencing (Zoom, Microsoft, Skype) interface.	21.8	37.6	25.2	15.3	2.66	.069	.986
Access to internet data affects my instructional delivery.	22.8	33.2	30.7	13.4	2.65	.069	.977
Workload affects my participation in online facilitation	20.8	28.2	38.1	12.9	2.57	.068	.961
Poor connectivity from students also hinders the flow of class sessions during online facilitation	30.2	27.7	20.8	21.3	2.67	.079	1.121
Access to functional devices (laptop, desktop) affects my instructional delivery	19.3	26.2	36.1	18.3	2.47	.071	1.003

Incessant power outage limits my participation in online facilitation	26.7	29.2	21.8	22.3	2.60	.078	1.107

The weighted average is 2.62

The result from Table 1 reveals the challenges confronting online facilitation according to the facilitators who participated in the study. The weighted average mean of 2.62 on a Likert scale of 4 implies that the factors listed in the table can influence the effective implementation of online facilitation within the ODL system. For instance, 56.4% of the respondents affirm that "poor internet connectivity from the facilitator's end hinders the flow of class session during online facilitation". Also, 55.9% believe that "incessant power outage limits their participation in online facilitation".

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the perceived instructional challenges of online facilitation across facilitators' disciplines.

Table 2: ANOVA of Perceived Instructional Challenges to Online Facilitation across Facilitators' Discipline

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	406.365	8	50.796	1.674	.107
Within Groups	5856.413	193	30.344		
Total	6262.777	201			

The result from Table 2 shows that there was no significant difference in the perceived challenges to online facilitation as an instructional delivery medium based on the facilitators' discipline. The level of significance (0.107) shows that the facilitators' discipline had no significant effect on the perceived instructional challenges confronting online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery. The null hypothesis was, therefore, accepted.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in the perceived instructional challenges of online facilitation across facilitators' ages.

Table 3: ANOVA Perceived Instructional Challenges to Online Facilitation across Facilitators' Ages

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	15.991	3	5.330	.169	.917
Within Groups	6246.787	198	31.549		
Total	6262.777	201			

The result from Table 3 shows that there was no significant difference in the perceived instructional challenges to online facilitation as an instructional delivery medium based on the facilitators' age. The level of significance (0.917) shows that the facilitators' age had no significant effect on the perceived instructional challenges confronting online facilitation. The null hypothesis was, therefore, accepted.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant difference in the perceived instructional challenges of online facilitation across the facilitators' cadre

Table 4: ANOVA of Facilitators' Perceived Instructional Challenges to Online Facilitation across Facilitators' Cadre.

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	580.700	6	96.783	3.321	.004
Within Groups	5682.077	195	29.139		
Total	6262.777	201			

Table 4 shows that there was a significant difference in the perceived challenges to online facilitation as an instructional delivery medium based on the cadre of facilitators. The level of significance (0.004) shows that the facilitators' cadre had a significant effect on the perceived instructional challenges confronting online facilitation. The null hypothesis was, therefore, rejected.

Discussion of Findings

Open and distance learning education has made a paradigm shift from face-to-face to E-learning, which involves the use of technology. Any technology intervention is expected to be met with resistance and skepticism as stakeholders, especially facilitators, may be attached to the outmoded ways of doing things. The findings from the study revealed the challenges confronting online facilitation according to the facilitators who participated in the study. More than half of the respondents affirmed that some of the items such as poor internet connectivity from my end hindering the flow of class sessions during online facilitation, learner's inability to navigate video conferencing (zoom, Microsoft, skype) interface, access to internet data affects my instructional delivery, poor connectivity from students also hinders the flow of class sessions, and Incessant power outage limits my participation in online facilitation. Online facilitation is generally an internet-based teaching-learning process, which requires Internet services for exchanging ideas and smooth interaction between the facilitators and students. Poor internet connectivity from the end of the facilitator will hinder the flow of class sessions during online facilitation. This result corroborated the findings of Adesina (2020) that the main challenge to effective online facilitation is poor Internet connectivity, which often leads to abrupt disconnection from Zoom meetings. Also, Freddy and Dennis's (2021) assertion supported this finding that online teaching is difficult to facilitate, especially if there are technical problems. Again, Abaid, Mahmoona, Shanza, & and Sajjad (2021) claimed that besides the internet being expensive, the use of mobile internet interrupts online connectivity due to poor internet signal. This may affect students' performance when they join in the middle of the class. Furthermore, the findings of this study show that the facilitators' discipline and age had no significant effect on the perceived instructional challenges confronting online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery. However, the result of the study shows that the facilitators' cadre had a significant effect on the perceived instructional challenges confronting online facilitation. This implies that facilitators' areas of discipline and age have nothing to do with the challenges

facing online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery.

Conclusion

Online facilitation is progressively making a pedagogical shift in the mode of engaging learners in open and distance learning, with an emphasis on discussion, interaction, and collaboration within the online learning space. The results of the study generated significant awareness of perceived instructional challenges confronting online facilitation. This study established the fact that Poor connectivity from students and the learners' inability to navigate the video conferencing (Zoom, Microsoft, Skype) interface hinders the flow of class sessions during online facilitation. However, less than half of the facilitators disagree with these items that access to functional devices such as laptops and desktops affects facilitators' instructional delivery and that facilitators' workload affects their participation in online facilitation.

Recommendation

In line with the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

i. Open and distance learning institutions should make functional devices such as laptops and desktops available as tools for the facilitators in order to make their instructional delivery effective.

ii. ODL institutions should be equipped in terms of a regular supply of electricity as well as increased internet bandwidth to enhance effective online facilitation

iii. Regular electricity supply and broad internet bandwidth should form part of the core criteria for approval of ODL programmes in any institution.

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