

**Challenges and Opportunity of Online Learning
In Developing Countries with Specific Focus on Liberia.**

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To explore online learning in developing countries with a particular focus on Liberia is the focus of this paper. As it is being explored, the following questions will be addressed: How did online learning originate? What would be the advantages and disadvantages of online learning in developing countries? What are some of the unique circumstances faced by Liberia in online education?

Ways of learning have changed owing to the continual development of technology. Nowadays in the developed countries, students no longer station in one place to acquire education. Rather, they have many different options which could be blended in online or face-to-face modes of instruction. In addition, online learning provides the expansion of educational opportunities, especially at higher levels of education.

This is believed to be a great benefit to developed countries and as well in developing countries. In spite of the successes, there are some disappointments, including poor quality (i.e. often stemming from the lack of investment in institutions) and the failure to reach large parts of those communities that have traditionally been disregarded by the higher educational sector (Gajaraj, *Distance Education: Promise, Performance and Potential*, 2001). I argue that online learning will play a key role in developing countries, especially Liberia, if there is a cultural change within a given school environment in favor of appropriate technology and good practice.

The use of online learning environment's not only being adapted by schools in developing countries; it is also useful for professional development activities. Both schools and other professional institutions such as the National Teachers' Institute of Nigeria utilize online learning tools to increase learning opportunities, foster professional collaboration, and support workers or teacher facility with technology resources. (Little & C., 2011).

Furthermore, some schools facing budget reduction and higher demand for professional development are considering the online learning platform to lower their bottom lines and maximize access to opportunities for teachers striving to enhance their skills. As the online learning platform is being embraced by many developing countries, it is important to be cautious about which product they choose and be realistic about the upfront and ongoing expenses that come with the infrastructure (Davis, 2009).

Importantly, efforts have been made by Non-governmental agencies to improve education in developing countries: particular attention is directed to those that are being marginalized. Among these agencies, United Nations Educational Scientific Organization (UNESCO), has been involved in numerous educational projects. UNESCO provides support capacity building and informed decision to current and potential users and providers by providing available course content. It has generated many series of workshops from the early 1960s to the present encouraging investment in education and reinforcing belief in the reliability and efficiency of education as a potential instrument for the rapid development of countries seeking development and literacy skills as absolute tools for social development and social advancement specifically, that any human society that attains at least a forty percent literacy rate may succeed in raising the productivity of the new literates living within the society (Idowu, 2012).

Furthermore, as a result of these factors, the new nations of Africa tried to increase both the educational opportunities they could offer while building on those they inherited from their colonial pasts. As a result, between 1960 and 1983, the number of primary schools quadrupled and the number of secondary schools learners quintupled; the number of secondary schools tripled and the number of universities doubled, while the number of secondary school teachers

rose twofold. Teacher training schools increased and the number of teachers teaching in them rose threefold. Similarly, the number of universities doubled and the number of lecturers rose just as significantly in Sub-Saharan Africa (Idowu, 2012).

UNESCO has played a significant role in the development of African country education. Its priority has been to build up education in such a way that it focuses on the challenges Africa is facing. The Regional Bureau for Education in Africa in Dakar, Senegal, and fifteen other field offices representing UNESCO in the Sub-Saharan countries are working to make sure that every African government and development partner maintains education amongst its priorities (Africa, 2014).

The African Virtual University (AVU), is a Pan African Intergovernmental organization which has been helping in developing countries to implement online learning. The AVU is a project that was first introduced in Kenya in 1997. The African Virtual University (AVU) was established by intergovernmental organization of African countries with a mandate to significantly increase access to quality higher education and training through the innovative use of information communication technologies.

The AVU has developed substantial experience in delivering programs via information communication technologies (ICT). The program area offers degrees, certificates, and diplomas. Other areas in which the AVU has been involved include designing and implementing eLearning projects, training instructors for eLearning platforms, and providing resources for managing a digital library (University, 2014).

Eighteen African governments from these countries: Kenya, Senegal, Mauritania, Cote d'Ivoire, Tanzania, Mali, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Benin, Ghana,

Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, South Sudan, Sudan, The Gambia, Guinea Bissau, and Nigeria have signed the Charter to establish the AVU as an Intergovernmental Organization.

Currently many centers have been open and equipped with different technologies to ease the flow of information. The connectivity at the centers has been provided through a two way Very Small Aperture Terminal (VSAT) internet with bandwidth of 128/512kbps. The connectivity of two other countries (Senegal and Ethiopia) is done through the local internet service providers (University, 2012).

Some challenges AVU faces in implementing its programs are high level, of poverty, and illiteracy, political and economic instability, and poor infrastructure, among others.

The most visible challenge of International Distance Education programs destined for Sub-Saharan Africa is the fact that given the poor infrastructure and lack of international communication technologies equipment within African households, the “anytime, anywhere” slogan does not apply (M, 2009).

There are numerous consequences to the very high frequency of internet disconnection measurable in developing countries. The result has been a variety of interaction problems such as poor sound quality, poor PowerPoint slides, poor image readability, long question-response lag time, question answer overlap, and numerous repetitions before students or teachers make themselves understood. These technology-related challenges impair instructor-to-learner relationships. During periods when the internet connection is supposed to be working, its narrow signals does not allow clear instructor to learner communication. This results in wasted time and sometimes, observable signs of frustration if not exasperation from both students and instructors. Therefore, the average African university has a frequency capacity equivalent to the broadband residential connections available in Europe, pays fifty times more for their bandwidth than their

educational counterparts in the rest of the world, and fails to monitor, let alone manage the existing challenges of signal for educational purposes. As a result, the slight signal that is available becomes even less useful for research and other education purposes. This kind of technological landscape makes the kind of evolving international distance education offered by the African Virtual University handicapped in Sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, instructors appear to be unprepared to handle such situations.

The lack of local tutors is another of the student's primary concerns in international online learning projects. Furthermore, the lack of social presence and the human touch are part of a larger problem that has dogged online distance education for numerous years in developing countries. In developed countries, by contrast, learning environments are more attuned to individualism and social presence is a predictor of learners' satisfaction in online learning environments. This can also be assumed to be even more the case with students from Sub-Saharan Africa, who are quite acquainted with a collective lifestyle within extended families in both villages and metropolitan environments (M, 2009).

Origin of online learning

The term online learning can also be considered as an approach where in the learner and the teachers can operate in different time and locations. Usually materials for such environment are designed as a self-directed learning guide for the student. In addition it requires deep-thinking that aims to remove barriers and contains that student may see as obstacles in accessing and succeeding in quality lifelong education. Thus, online learning seems as an educational method, and a logical construct which has been identified as a remedy for combating education challenges associating with developing nations like Nigeria. It's believed that in developing

countries, online learning and continuing education not only provide growth and competitiveness, but also have social and economic impact on the students.

Online learning was first established in South-Saharan Africa by the National Teachers' Institute, Kadauna in 1976 by the Federal Government of Nigeria. This formation was intended to develop qualify teachers who would meet the requirements of Universal Primary Education (UPE). Furthermore, the National Teachers' Institute Act of 1978 provides courses of education leading to the development, upgrading, and certification of teachers as specified in a relevant syllabus using distance education techniques. It is believed that NTI was birthed in Nigeria to conduct courses through Online Distance Learning platform. These courses were first conducted through the print media. Moreover, efforts were made to share instruction with the assistance of AM and FM radio station donated by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). The COL is an intergovernmental organization created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage the development and sharing of open learning distance education knowledge, resources and technologies. The organization presented the first technology for distance learning in Nigeria and provided training through the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) where students could be thought using multi-media instructional technology (Idowu, 2012).

English and communication courses designed for beginning students enrolled at National Open University of Nigeria were supplemented with audio tape recorders. Tutorials were organized at various study locations around the world. Currently National Open University of Nigeria has twenty three resources centers where tutorials are conducted face to face sessions by short term facilitators, supplement online learning. The National Teachers Institute provides similar services at its locations around the country. Therefore, National Teachers Institute

remains a primary institute of the professional and functional, intermediate and level teachers need for the nation's education (O & K, 2006).

Online Learning in Nigeria

A new element was introduced in the Nigeria educational system in 2002; the reopening of the institute's enabling Act No. of 1978 charged NTI Kaduna, among other things, to provide courses of instruction leading to the development, upgrading, and certification of teachers as specified in a relevant syllabus using distance education techniques. It's believed that NTI was the first institution formally established in Nigeria to offer courses via Online Distance Learning methods. The NTI courses were offered predominantly through the print media. Further efforts were made to disseminate instruction with the aid of an FM radio station donated by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). This presented the first ever attempt to make use of instructional technology in distance-learning settings in Nigeria and help lead to further attempts by the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) to teach their students using multi-media instructional technology (Idowu, 2012).

In 2002, a new element was introduced into the Nigerian educational system: the reviving of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), which had closed eighteen years earlier due to political upheaval in the country. However, NOUN reopened and into prominence the use of Online learning, along with conventional institutions in Nigeria: Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria; online learning Institute at the University of Lagos; Centre for Distance Learning at the University of Ibadan; and the Online Learning and Continuing Education Centre at the University of Abuj. Thus, the arrival of NOUN on the educational scene provided credence and

the increased level of awareness needed for the acceptance of Online Learning in Nigeria (O & K, 2006).

According to recent studies, education by mail was by then a quality method for providing instruction for all because it allowed universities to access an infinite number of potential students. Nowadays, there are institutions that offer only online courses. At the same time, brick-and-mortar or traditional institutions offer online courses in addition to their face-to-face courses. The convenience of online learning has created an environment wherein it is possible to reach a student population that was previously unreachable because of the lack of modern technology (Caruth & Caruth, 2012).

As the idea of online learning spreads throughout western countries, Nigeria, one of the strong economic nations of Africa, was the first to have a university that exclusively provided a distance learning mode of education. Since then its distance teaching and learning system delivers courses through a connection via information communication technology (ICT). Unlike traditional method of delivery there are no structural face-to-face connections between students and the teachers.

High quality, self-motivated, learner centered instructional materials are made available to students, who are engage in face to face learning. On the other hand facilitation is optional for online students (O & K, 2006).

Recent occurrences shows that open education differ from that of distance learning system along with a face-to-face teaching and learning system. They are more typical of a conventional university in Nigeria and other parts of the world. The study which was conducted, it accessed students' views about distance learning. The findings from the study showed that

students enrolling for that period demonstrated positive perceptions and attitudes toward this form of learning compared to traditional forms of higher education (David & K, 2006).

Globalizations is one of the factors that is encouraging online learning in some African nations like Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana, etc.

Advantages And Disadvantages of Online Learning in Developing Countries

Online Learning in developing countries has enabled developing nations to be able to respond to increased demands, mainly for post-secondary education that was previously denied. In spite of poor governmental support, abysmal resources and an inadequate supply of instructional talent, distance education has continued to grow in almost all developing Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth countries.

There are many reasons for this growth but none as compelling as the hunger for learning felt by those who have been denied it for generations. In the 1960's there was a political desire to increase provisions for learning, the economic desire to cut the cost of education while increasing participation levels, the social desire toward egalitarianism, to ensure equity and equality of opportunity, and in some locations, an educational desire to improve the relevance of the curriculum (Gajaraj, Distance Education: Promise, Performance and Potential, 2001).

Improving and expanding education is very important for any nation's national development policy. Notwithstanding, countries fail to offer education to all people in a society through a conventional on campus system of education primarily due to lack of infrastructural facilities and the constraints embodied in it. Online learning can play a significant role in narrowing this gap. In addition, allowing students from different backgrounds, environments, and geographical settings access, without requiring the uses of scarce and on-site space, online

learning systems offer educational institutions more revenue. This indicates online learning is a vast, cost effective way of providing education. However, mainly in developing countries, students who cannot afford to go to school due to the ruined economic condition of their parents can have access to education by earning their own income. There is no doubt that distance education has the potential and capacity to contribute to the growth and expansion of high quality universities in developing countries (M.N. & M.O., 2003).

Some of the unique circumstances faced by Liberia in online education

Liberia is a country in West Africa bordered by Sierra Leone to its west, Guinea to its north and the Ivory Coast to its east. The country covers an area of 43,000 square miles. It suffered 14 years of civil crisis from 1989 to 2003 that left the country's infrastructure in shambles (Duva, 2002). Consequently, much of its infrastructure, including the education sector, was destroyed and its systems badly affected.

Moreover, many of the schools were closed down either due to lack of teachers, good facilities, or bad roads throughout the entire country. Since the end of the crisis, some of the schools have reopened while others are still being restored. Most of the schools in the country are operated by churches or Christian missions, others by the government under the supervision of the Monrovia Cooperative School System (Education System in Liberia, 2012).

However the country has been making strides since the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. She is a Harvard educated economist and she was elected Africa's first female president on January 16, 2006. An effort to reduce corruptions, revitalize broken institutions, build support from international contributors, and encourage foreign investments has been critical in the rebuilding process of the country. The transformation of infrastructure and improving incomes

will depend on financial and technical assistance from donor countries and foreign investment in critical sectors, such as infrastructure and power generation. The country achieved increase growth rate of 8.3% from 2010 to 2013 due to positive world prices for its resources (AGENCY, 2014). However, in the future there needs to be significant improvement in reducing the poverty rate of eighty percent and unemployment rate of eighty-five percent needs to be improved. Also, the nation's primary means of communication of telephone needs to see progress because the country is ranked at the bottom compared to other developing nations in the world. This is relevant for online learning durability and possibility in the nations. Compare to other countries Liberia currently rank low and need to improve in the above mention categories for online learning to be achieved.

Overall, the country's education sector is slowly being revived by both governmental and nongovernmental organizations. Nowadays, most of the schools are located within Monrovia, the capital city. Embarking on an online learning or eLearning in Liberia will thus be helpful and may provide many useful resources to promote student learning. As in the developing countries, online learning or computer based learning provides flexibility and convenience (Kokemuller & Media, 2014). When the required technology is put into place in Liberia, students who may not have the ability to be a part of traditional classes can often consider taking online classes. They will not have to go through the difficult job of getting on to a campus. Besides this, some students will be delighted to work from home, limiting the need to travel, which will save both time and money.

While online learning offers many opportunities in academia, there are also drawbacks. In developing countries, one of these is limited social interaction. Online students often engage peers in online discussions and interact with teachers via e-mail. This does not cover the face-to-

face experiences of a traditional classroom. Furthermore, students do not have a direct connection with teachers so they can ask questions during class to expand their insight on a topic. Another is lack of structure. This means it can be a difficult learning situation for students who are undisciplined or unmotivated. In such a learning environment, there is no standard meeting time and students do not have regular, direct interaction with instructors and classmates who can remind them of assignments and encourage them to work harder (Kokemuller & Media, 2014).

Conclusion Circumstances faced by Liberia in online education

A majority of students in Liberia can only afford to attend the public or government schools or university. In most of the schools operated by the government in the country, student performance is poor. This is being attributed to the low salaries being paid to instructors in most instances pay less attention to the students. (Education System in Liberia, 2012). Online learning has changed the way learn in developing countries. It has both advantages and disadvantages. Nowadays students can work from home at their own convenience and also take care of their many different day to day responsibilities. Though online education comes with lot of benefits, there are disadvantages. Those students who are not self-motivated usually have difficulty keeping up with school work and other assignments. Embarking on online learning in Liberia will be a huge breakthrough no only to the students but also to the education sector.

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