

Impact of Socio-Cultural Elements on the Design of Instructional Materials for Open and Distance Learning Programmes

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Abstract

Indigenous teaching systems in Africa which were pervasively informal, equipped learners with the social and occupational skills to grapple with the challenges of their socio-cultural and natural environment. This was however, disrupted by the invasion of the continent by colonialists who thrust upon Africans, formal learning systems meant for purposes of assimilation, evolution and 'education' depending on their imperialist interests. The accompanying curriculum and instructional modes of the colonial learning systems were foreign; they made learning terse and left the learners tense. Although instructional materials remain core in the sustenance of the informality and delivery of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes, a gap still exists in the efficacy and quality of such materials in new ODL institutions in Africa. This paper will examine the socio-cultural elements of language, presentational and dramatic arts and folklore and their usages in the design of print and other formats of instructional materials in ODL programmes. With a review of relevant literature, bibliographic and archival materials, the writer examines and critically analyzes some print course materials of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) to assess the level of cultural friendliness or otherwise of the textual- and non-textual inputs. The study reveals among other things that the nuances of the learners' historical cum cultural peculiarities have been largely neglected in the course materials examined. Following these findings, the researcher recommends the exploration of socio-cultural elements in enhancing instructional materials for ODL programmes where their potentials have not been properly articulated in the continent. Increased use of indigenous cultural elements in the texts and accompanying graphics, illustrations, animation, etc. for instructional materials design may not only reverse the apparent negative results of colonial learning systems if fully explored, but would also equip the graduates of such institutions with the necessary skills to face the challenges of sustainable development of their society.

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Learning is defined by psychologists as a "change in behaviour, more or less permanent in nature, which is the result of experience and reinforced practice" (Encyclopedia Americana 1988: 116). Indigenous modes of learning in Africa have goals, structures, contents and methods tailored to meet the needs and future challenges of the various communities. The modes involve the bringing up of the young by the older members of the society. Indigenous learning takes place when the experience of the society is transmitted from generation to generation. As Mwalimu Nyerere put it,

The purpose of education, whether informal or formal, is to transmit from one generation to the next the accumulated wisdom and knowledge of the society, and their active participation in its maintenance or development. (Nyerere, 1982,17)

The hallmark of the indigenous forms of learning in Africa is the informality. The process of teaching and learning take place from day to day experience and last from the cradle to the grave. Yet the learning modes prepare the learners to meet the challenges of their immediate environment which they impart upon daily and uniquely, even beyond their lifetime. ¹

The curriculum is designed with emphasis on the living conditions of the people; their view of the universe, God, relationship between the Supreme Being and mankind as well as relationships between various groups of people. More importantly the learning forms have a lot to do with the natural environment on which the survival and well being of the society depends and determines its mode of production. It is furthermore functional in the sense that it is primarily aimed at helping children in particular and adults learn and master the necessary social and occupational skills which enable them to effectively cope with their socio-cultural and natural environment. In other words, it is inward oriented as opposed to the outward directed western colonial forms of education which came with the European conquest of Africa in the 19th Century.

The foreign learning and teaching systems were aimed at transplanting foreign world views and life styles on the conquered Africans. The objective of education in this case was not geared to help Africans live in harmony with their environment; it was rather to establish and perpetuate the master-slave status quo between the colonizer and colonized. The French and Portuguese called their westernisation efforts assimilation, the Belgians evolution while the British, being more polite, labeled it as education (Rodney, 1985 cited in Garba Diallo, 2003) These foreigners introduced very formal modes of learning and teaching which disrupted the indigenous modes and left the learners in distraught states. They now had to cope with having schools located in sacrosanct places away from the homes and cope with all that came along with formality. Formal learning and teaching modes are not part of indigenous African socio-cultural lifestyle.

Culture² is the embodiment of the people, it is also of the things they share and do together - language, family structure, how and when they plant, how they die, and what they hold to be sacred. Indeed virtually everything the people hold in common is a part of their culture. Elements that make up culture include norms, values, beliefs, technology, etc. While values are abstract ideals, norms are definite principles or rules which people are expected to observe. So, elements of culture of a people include how they dress, their marriage custom and family life, their patterns of work, religious ceremonies, leisure pursuits, goods they create – and which become meaningful to them – bows, arrows, computers, books, dwellings, etc. (CSS 101, 15)

There is no doubt that Africa, as the African Ministerial Council on Science and Technology noted recently, has “a relatively rich body of indigenous knowledge and related technologies ... embodied in the cultural and ecological diversities of the continent ... used by the African people for thousand of years to solve specific developmental and environmental problems. (NEPAD document)

Research into the experiences of individual learners has stressed how important this dimension of enjoyment of the mode of learning in line with their cultural peculiarities and relationship can be in fostering personal transformation. (Lunneborg, 1994, 1997)

Without joining issues in the dialectics of where the boundaries now lie between learner support and course design and development, this writer like M. Thorpe (2002) takes the position that learner support is “that which happens after the course materials have been made.” This is to distance all possible distractions from our focus here which is on the impact of socio-cultural elements in course material design. Keegan (1996) identifies two distinct sub-systems within distance education: course development and student or learner support services, “which he characterizes as the essential feedback mechanisms that are characteristic of education” distinguishing it from the publishing house or material producer.

Yet we should not lose sight of the fact that socio-cultural elements are also components of learner support when viewed against the background of Tait’s (2000, 291) definition of learner support as “the range of services both for individuals and for students in groups which complement the course materials or learning resources that are uniform for all learners and which are often perceived as the major offering of institutions using ODL.” The role of learner support as means of articulating uniform course materials with the interest of diverse student groups, complements the role of the course materials – providing for interpersonal interaction, identifying conversation and community as values which should not be lost in technicist approaches to system of learning management.

Again, like Thorpe (2008), although her subject matter is on the place of online interaction, the question of whether the impact of socio-cultural elements should be placed in the purview of course design or the realm of learner support is contentious. This is because the old notion that learner support should be placed after course material production is losing ground. It, according to Thorpe (2008) “should be questioned and possibly reversed.” The import of this will suffice presently. Some of her deductions hold sway for some print course materials of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) which we examine in this paper.

The concept of Science, Technology and Society (STS) encourages reform in science education across the globe. Emphasis has shifted from integrated science to STS by UNESCO and other stakeholders in science education. The concept emphasizes context. The goal is to achieve the teaching and learning of science in the concept of human experience.

For design of course materials, R.K Lowe (1989) hit the right cord when he asserts that “illustrations can be seen as far more than icing on the instructional cake. They can take the role of a full partner with text in the explanatory process”

This foregrounds our examination of the NOUN print course material in the School of Science and Technology – *PHY 131: Hazards in Laboratory and Laboratory Safety*. Giving example of “the consequences of unplanned dumping of industrial chemical wastes that affected small children of an elementary school” (97) with the disposal of toxic chemicals in Love Canal is quite remote. A much more local example such as the celebrated Koko toxic waste dumping, would have been more culturally-friendly.

Also, the illustrations demonstrating positions of safety with photographs of Indians on several pages of the book ³ would have been more culturally friendly with Nigerian faces.

According to Lowe, for enhanced benefits to be reaped from the combination of text and illustration, “careful analysis of the subject matter is necessary.” A careful analysis of another NOUN print course material in the School of Business and Human Resources Management, *TSM 106: The Cultural Heritage* would have been more culturally friendly⁴ with full colour of the illustration photographs of celebrants during festivals in the examples used. Also other tourist sites exemplified in the course such as, the famous Durbar (8, 53), the dyeing pits in Kano (55), the *Afromosia laxiflora* tree - the tree from which the charcoal for making fire that could smelt iron ore is made- (92), actual charcoal preparation (93), the Isundunrin Domed Furnace (95) and the aerial view of Sukur total landscape would be more culturally friendly with colour photographs. In fact Tourism course materials including others such as *TSM101: Understanding Tourism*, which features colourless illustrations on pages 2, 12, 21 and 36 among others, would be more culturally impartful with full colour photographs.

Festival performance texts employ multiple media for their messages (Gbenoba, 2006, 131). Marshall McLuhan (1964) earlier stated that the media remain expressive extensions of man’s senses and functions, adding that they affect man’s relationships with his environment. Fundamental progress or retrogression, as the case may be, is therefore made as we employ these media of speech, writing, printing, filming, etc to convey our message.

African indigenous festival performances including the popular *Eyo* festival in Lagos, convey messages through acting and other paraphernalia of stage – dancing, poetry rendition, singing with the attendant musicality, sculptural as well as other presentational arts. The presentation of the aspects that could be arrested in print through digitalized technology may be used to enhance instructional materials for ODL and reduce the shortcomings of cold print format.

Although the potentials of indigenous African cultural elements of presentational arts as a medium of instruction may not be exhaustively exploitable in the print course material format, the musicality of the written word with the ingenious combination of linguistic, stylistic and semantic aphorisms – with appropriate interplay of literary devices displayed in reader-friendly graphics and instructionally enhancing colours would go a long way in making our print instructional materials better. This would still leave, if not even open up further, the great potentials of these same cultural elements (of indigenous presentational arts) for the design of other non-print formats including the web interactive.

Therefore just as the print format of NOUN course material *GST 201: Nigeria's People and Culture* which is about Nigerians, would do well if spiced with the popular folksongs and folktales of the people being described, a rendition of the instrumental version of their indigenous songs should be used as interlude or background music in any web and non web instructional material of the same course. Same goes for similar materials as the *TSM 106* highlighted earlier.

The song accompaniment for GST 101 demonstration compact disc would be better enhanced with the use of an instrumental rendition of “*Alo alo o, alo, alo, alo*” after the presenter’s instruction to the learner to ‘Listen carefully to the following passage!’

Just as Lowe rightly concludes, “like most text examples, illustrations are likely to be far more effective if, rather than simply being presented, they are set in context whereby students explore the concepts and relationship they embody.” The NOUN is probably poised to address these challenges as seen in some of its recently printed course materials. *BED 111: Introduction to Keyboarding* is printed with colour illustrations. If produced without colour illustrations, the material might not have adequately instructed the learners who are expected to practice with computers which feature colour pop ups on the monitors. The 133-page course material is features colour illustrations throughout for higher instructional fidelity which could also benefit other print course materials when the university extends it to go round. The use of more indigenous cultural elements in the texts and accompanying graphics, illustrations, animation, oral narrative techniques and so on for instructional materials design may not only reverse the apparent negative.

The language element of culture signifies at various levels the main of which are – iconic, indexical, symbolic and aesthetic. The graphical representation signifies the medium of expression among others. Some content words, no matter the medium, however, have indexical functions. Then, according to Ricouer,

Symbols occur when language produces signs of composite degree in which the meaning, not satisfied with designating some one thing, designates another meaning attainable only and through the first intentionality. (1970, 16)

This means any word used (especially creatively) is denotatively and connotatively signifying. That is why Viti Elgar aptly asserts that the “Linguistic symbol is a sign of double signification” as he identifies the symbolic functions as: for unification, revelation of reality and adaptation of reality. (1979, 17)

Language at the aesthetic level is no less significant for the design of instructional materials for ODL. Pierrie Guiraud situates the function of aesthetic signification as on two antithetical modes of experience – the logical and the affective (1975, 66) while Adedotun Ogundeji much later situates it as the rhetoric and poetic. (1989, 75). The four levels of signification inherent in linguistic medium examined so far, (more with the polyglot continent) taken with the myriad of indigenous cultural elements available, larger space exists for possible exploration by the instructional material designer for ODL courses in Africa.

It is exigent therefore that the design of instructional materials be enhanced through further exploration of socio-cultural elements. This is with the aim to reduce, if not totally eliminate, the harsh formality which tenses up the learner and makes learning a monumental task in African ODL institutions. Increased use of indigenous socio-cultural elements in the texts and accompanying graphics, illustrations, animation and oral narrative techniques among others, for

instructional materials design for their programmes may not only reverse the apparent negative results of colonial learning systems but would also equip the graduates of such institutions with the necessary skills to face the challenges of sustainable development of their society.

Notes

¹ This is because the indigenous Africans continue to exert great influence on the living members of the community as dead ancestors. Indigenous festivals in Africa especially ritual festivals are laden with the invoking the spirit of the ancestors who participate at various stages particularly at the initiation stages. According to the Ugandan poet Okot P'Bitek (1986) "Man has a bundle of duties which are expected from him by society, as well as a bundle of rights and privileges that the society owes him. In African belief, even death does not free him. If he had been an important member of society while he live, his ghost continues to be revered and fed; he, in turn, is expected to guide and protect the living." (*Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol*)

² Suppose that A and B are sitting together and B is telling a story about the origin of the people that A and B consider themselves to be. This story is one that is known by all of B's generation. What is told to A by B is culture. Suppose also that B has thought about this story and has some different ideas about the elements of the story but B has never told this to anyone else. So long as B keeps this to herself, it is not a part of the culture of the people of A and B. Therefore culture is said to be shared and learned. The consensual element means simply that many share it and agree to its meaning and importance." (*CSS 101*, 15)

³ See pages 101, 102, 116, 117, 118 and 119 i.e Figures 6.1, 6.2, 6.4, 6.5 a and b and 6.6 demonstrating the cleaning of the victim's mouth, adjustment of the chin and head, recovery position, artificial respiration a and b and heart massaging respectively in *PHY 131*.

⁴ The popular *Eyo* Festival of the people of Lagos given as example is reputed for its colorfulness. Beliefs are associated with religion. Those things we hold to be true. Beliefs and values blend. Our national ideologies are also beliefs. Fundamental Christians believe that the world was created in seven days by God while the average American believes that man evolved from other forms of life over a very long period. – Both are belief systems (involving certain assumptions about what is and how things have come to be), that shapes the lives of the true believers. They shape their lives by supporting their notions of what is important, what is real and how we are to believe at all times.

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