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Counselling as Communication Strategies in Open and Distance Education:  
NOUN Experience.

**BY**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The whole world is now referred to as a global village because of the technological revolution that is taking place especially in the area of information and communication. In this write up the author started the discussion with definition of communication, highlighted means of communication, and purposes of communication, counselling as a form of communication, conceptual frame work for communication in ODL, component of good communication, media selection and combination for effective counselling process in NOUN. The writer in his recommendations, advocated that for a counsellor to be effective in discharging his responsibilities he or she must attain a certain level of competency in communication skills, select appropriate media and must be efficient in the use of communication devices especially computer. Also the media of counselling must be readily available to both the counsellor and counselees*

**Introduction**

The whole world is now referred to as a global village because of the technological revolution that is taking place especially in the area of information and communication. Though it is difficult to define communication through a single definition, communication as defined by Encarta dictionaries (2007) is an exchange of information between people for example, by means of speaking, writing or using a common system of signs or behaviour. From the above definition, communication could be viewed from its three components – the

source, the channel and the receiver. In the case of the source/ receiver of communication could be the counsellor or the student. From the channel point of view, communication is a medium, a carrier of information from the source to the receiver and /or vice-visa (COL,2003)

On one hand there are various tools and media which serve as means of communication among human beings, starting from sign which is regarded as the primitive means to super computer-based communication. The prominent means of communication are; signs and sound, language, postal system, telephone, mass media, satellites and Computer (IGNOU, 2001)

On the other hand communication media distribute messages in text, still and moving images and sound. Knowledge generating messages may be communicated to large numbers of learners, either synchronously or asynchronously pushed by broadcasting or access on demand through audio/visual players or internet. As these devices change, so the quality and nature of the message will change (COL,2003).

### **Purposes of communication**

Communication serves two purposes:

- One is the distribution or delivery of information in form of pre-packaged materials and transmission of synchronous or broadcast programme lectures.
- The second role of communication is the crucial component of all education which is the interaction between teachers and learners and where possible, between learners also (IGNOU 2001).

### **Four levels of communication**

Communication can be classified into four main levels; **interpersonal communication, group communication, organisational communication and mass communication (IGNOU, 2001)**. Counselling is more concern with interpersonal and group communication rather than the other two levels of communication. This is mainly because interpersonal communication includes

conversation between two persons, which they share their feeling, emotions, thoughts and ideas in cases of individual counselling etc while in group communication; the members of a group interact with each other on common interest in cases of group counselling. Group communication is used to take a collective decision on the problems, an issue or a matter of common concern. Both individual and group counselling are fashioned along this line.

### **Place of information and communication technologies in open and distance education**

The whole process of counselling in all forms (individual and group) is based on communication between counsellor and counsees. The two way communication between the students and counsellor or others longing to the support services in open and distance education is what Holmberg (1981) referred to as didactic conversation. According to him, the two- way kind of interaction between the students and teacher or other could occur either through writing or spoken words This discussion would therefore be guided by Holmberg theory of guided didactic conversation and good communication which is a key to supporting open and distance education learners.

In Open and Distance Education, the new information and communication devices make it possible for people to share a common learning experience in real time or to enable an individual learner to have a unique personal interaction with the teacher/counsellor or with another learner, no matter where, at anytime and needed by anyone The new information society has created new challenges and opportunities for the design and delivery of counselling services, both individually and in group, no matter where she or he is and at any time ( UNSCO 2004).

The fact that has emerged from the discussion so far is that open and distance learning is one of most rapidly growing field of education and its potential impact on all education delivery systems has been greatly enhanced through the

development of communication and information technologies (UNESCO,2004). Even design teams develop learning materials that aim to promote 'active learning' to replicate in sense the dialogue is essential to the learning process (Laurillard, 1993).

### ***Communication and interaction as counselling strategies in supporting learners in Open and Distance Education***

The main focus of this write up is how counsellors communicate with learners at a distance. To the learners of open and distance learning counselling means a more learner-centred approach, enrichment, higher quality and new ways of interaction, though Ryan (1998) argued that at present, much of what is provided in the form of learner support is system-driven rather than student-centre.

Counselling as an integral part of learner support in ODE is based on interpersonal or group communication and interaction between the counsellor and counselees. Interaction is the key to all main theories of learner support, because it is the only way of addressing the needs of learners in the terms in which those learners wish to express themselves (Thorpe, 2002) The components of good communication includes; listening, responding, maintaining contact and effective use of communication media are all imbedded in the process of counselling (COL, 2003 P43). Detail discussion of the components of good communication is beyond the scope of this write up. In fact the basic skills of a counsellor which comprise selecting, listening, structuring and epilogue are intrinsically derived from good communication skills. Listening skills are important in counselling whether you are listening to a learner's voice or to a learner's message in written communication. As a counsellor you must interpret both the explicit and implicit messages. You must confirm that you have understood the learner's message correctly by interpreting clarify and restating it. The counsellor needs to be a good listener (COL, 2003). Essentially any contact with you will build confidence and motivation and it will regularly acted as a sort of routine

check whereby they could reassure themselves heading towards the right direction (Rickwood and Godwin, 1997)

Counsellors are expected to be consistently empathic, genuine, accepting and respectful generally. They should be able to develop a more open and trusting relationship with students and facilitate the opportunity for students to develop more open and trusting relationship with each other, which usually results in a climate of collaboration and mutual exchange in the learning process (Poonwasse, 2001). This helping relationship could only be established through effective and efficient communication.

Counselling in National Open University of Nigeria is manned by professional counsellors and aimed at helping individual learner to clarify real needs, reconciling the conflicting demands of home and work, and coming to terms with isolation and with problems resulting from previous experiences. Counsellors in some Open and Distance institutions are responsible for both tutoring and counselling but in NOUN, the student counsellors provide regular guidance and counselling to the students with respect to several aspects of their studies including enrolment, choice of programmes and courses, when and how to study, and when to seek for special clinics for academic guidance. The counsellors have the responsibility of keeping in constant touch with distance learners and providing any early warning signals regarding difficulty with studies in order to provide prompt remedial actions. For counsellors to interact effectively with the learners at a distance, they must be aware of barriers to effective communication in counselling, media of counselling and challenges. The National Open University of Nigeria recruited and posted to thirty-six Study Centres forty five **professional counsellors** across Nigeria to counsel her students from pre-entry stage through graduation and beyond.

### **Media of counselling and challenges in National Open University of Nigeria**

Communication media are essential facilitating tools in counselling process in Open and Distance Education. Their effective use requires counsellors to understand the effects of distance and technology so that you can choose the right delivery method for the message, and design messages to make the best use of the technology (UNSCO 2004). For example, it is much better to convey detailed information in print rather than over the phone, so that the learner can refer to the printed message later on (COL, 2003). The writer would as of now highlights the most commonly used media of counselling in NOUN. These include face to face individual/group counselling, telephone (one to one )/telephone conferencing (one to many), counselling by letters, and handbook, Counselling through email and computer conferencing

**Face-to-face counselling** in many ways remains the most important medium for counselling of all kinds at all the study centres of the University. However, it is extremely expensive in terms of staff, time and travel and sometimes, could also be inaccessible to distance learners. One way of at least reducing the problems of individual face-to-face counselling is through group counselling. Although a group loses the one-to-one relationship of counsellor and learner, it provides the opportunity for learners to share their concerns with each other.

**Telephone counselling (one-to-one, teleconferencing, answer phones)**

**One-to-one telephone counselling** involves the counsellor staying in different location from the learner and didactically communicates through cellular or fixed-line telephone with the learner. This counselling process is being used for counselling distance learners living far away from the University study centres. This process can either initiate by the counsellor or the learner. Counselling through telephone is quiet different from face-to –face counselling and main different is the absence of facial clue but the counselling skills used are the same. TOLL call phones are provided at every study centre and personal cellular phones of the counsellors are being used for informing, advising and counselling

the students of NOUN but very expensive because of the high tariff charged by Global Mobile Service providers and poor service rendered.

**Teleconferencing** is another counselling process used in NOUN to counsel distance learners and it involves linking a number of people at different locations to the same telephone line with the counsellor being at one end while others are at different ends. Teleconferencing can be in form of two-way-audio and one-way-video conferencing. A well equipped e-learning has been established at the NOUN Headquarter. The University currently working with NASRAD through collaboration had linked up 16 of its study centres with the Nigerian satellite for the provision of internet connectivity, conduct interactive video conferencing and conduct tutorial facilitation, advice, information and counselling on line across all these centres from just one base (Ipaye, 2007)

**Counselling by internet** as is commonly in use to counsel learners in NOUN. The use of internet for counselling demands access to computers and telecommunication equipment. On-line discussion or dial-up telephone can be conducted through the computer networks. The counsellor interacts with more learners simultaneously at different terminals. The counsellor announces the contact time in cyberspace and distance learners log-in to discuss the issues. It is known as bulletin board system as the chat room or talk room which holds one-to-one or to many conversations respectively. **E-mail** is another commonly used for counselling by internet. For example instead of writing letters and waiting for several days to get the reply by post, counsellors can post assignments, announcements, supplemental materials, as well as give feedback or responses to distance learners' individually or in a group. **World Wide Web** is another way that can be used by the counsellor of reaching out in a one-to-many way. In this way the counsellor can see the distance learner and the learners can see the counsellor. The internet counselling is suitable for informing, advising and counselling the distance learners.

As earlier mentioned, effort is being intensified by the University to provide each study centre with computer laboratories equipped with between 30 to 50 computers each and internet connectivity. As of now 16 of its study centres have linked up with the Nigerian satellite for the provision of internet connectivity. The greatest challenge facing both the counsellors and students of NOUN is their low level of computer literacy. Though the University has been organising computer literacy training for all categories of staff and subsidising the purchase of lab top computers for staff, no appreciable progress has been made in counselling through internet

**Counselling by letter** is commonly used at all NOUN study centres. This is partly because other forms of communication can be very difficult and expensive in Nigeria. The process of counselling through letters whether as a counsellor initiative or a response to a letter received follows the basic principles of counselling. Active intelligent listening is conceived as an act of careful reading of the letter in order to clarify the feelings and issues in the learner's letter. It is possible to respond with warmth, acceptance, genuineness and empathy, structuring the letter to ensure its meaning is clear. Counselling by letter or short messages through the phone is suitable for informing and advising the distance learners

**Counselling by computer or interactive video-disc** is yet to take off in NOUN to counsel the learners. Counselling by computer or video is a growing phenomenon especially with the advent of relatively cheap micro-computers. . In NOUN, all the study centres are expected to have computer laboratories equipped with between 30 to 50 computers each but some have taken off. The relatively interactive and non-threatening nature of computer counselling makes many learners appear to enjoy it and find it useful. This process is mostly used for developmental counselling and career. It is suitable for advising, informing and limited counselling the distance learners. However, if learners are using a computer technology for the first time, it is better to provide instead instructions in print so that they are not left without any means of communication

**Counselling through handbooks.** In NOUN, Print materials, such as student handbook, getting to know your university, etc are being developed, printed and distributed to the students. They are mostly used to address information and advisory needs of the students. In most cases frequently asked questions by the students are addressed in these books

There are other media of counselling in use in open and distance education. Some of these include counselling by broadcasting, radio broadcasting etc. but the writer had decided to limit his discussion to the ones commonly used in NOUN A word of caution, in NOUN there is no research to determine how effective these media of counselling are effective or not

### **The challenges of communication in counselling in NOUN**

The main challenge of the various channels of communication used in education these days is the selection of appropriate channel of communication which delivery clearly, accurate and quality information to the students as desired by the source (the counsellor or education institution) without any distortion. The effectiveness of each component contributes to the overall effectiveness of the communication process. There are various stages through which a message has to pass through from the source. Barriers to effective communication in counselling in NOUN might be caused by the senders and receivers poor skills of communication, perception of counsellors as unapproachable, inability of learners to speak or write fluently or use computer and internet facilities etc) or by the external factors such as lack of or efficient communication facilities eg internet, constant electricity supply etc. It is important to note here that the detailed discussion of these barriers is beyond the scope of this write up. This brings us to another important issue which is media selection

## **Media selection**

The process of media selection is often considered extremely important part of designing learner support services especially counselling service. The decision regarding media selection is essentially based on media attributes or characteristics. Media of counselling should be selected only;

- a) if it is capable of presenting all the intended information to the counselee in clear and unambiguous manner
- b) if it enables the counselee to take active part in the counselling process

The following issues should be considered while selecting media of counselling in open and distance education;

- 1) Access: That is how accessible is a particular technology for counselees?
- 2) Flexibility: How flexible is it for a particular target group?
- 3) Cost: What is the cost structure of each technology and the unit cost per counselee?
- 4) What kinds of counselling needs of students that could be met through this medium?
- 5) What is the best technology that supports a specific counselling strategy?
- 6) Interactivity and user friendliness: What kinds of interaction does the technology enable? How easy it is to use?
- 7) Organisational issues: What are the organisational requirements and the barriers to be removed before this technology can be used successfully
- 8) Novelty: How new is this technology?
- 9) Speed: How quickly can information be disseminated through the medium?

In NOUN media selection is left to the discretion of individual counsellor and availability of the media. According to Schrammm (1977) answers to these questions can make the process of media selection appropriate as well as effective

## **Media mix or combination**

Another crucial issue of media facilitation is the process of determine the ideal combination of media attributes to effect optimum counselling process in a given

situation. Different distance teaching institution, combine various media of counselling according to the learners needs, target groups philosophies, resources and content of learners support services. Every media of counselling differs in term of their attribution and the effectiveness for specific counselling process and specific learner groups. It is important for a counsellor to be able to determine the ideal combination of media attributes that would product quality communication in a given counselling situation

The two main concerns of counsellors should be

- a) which media attributes are best suited to deliver and facilitate effective counselling and associated counselling outcomes; that is behavioural changes in learner
- b) if more than one media is to be used how to ensure that the chosen media are integrated with each other and with chosen counselling outcomes (COL,2003)

### **Place of service delivery:**

The study centres serve as the first contact point between the students and the University and coordinate the activities of the University within the state of abode. All support services especially counselling, information and advice are rendered to the students at the study centres. As of November 2007, there were 34 functional study Centres in 31 States of the country including the Federal capital territory. New centres will take off within the next few months in some other States and before the end of 2008, all the 36 States of the Federation would have had at least one study centre. Some Local Government Areas, Local Government Areas, are already offering facilities for the establishment of study centres in their local governments (Ipaye, 2007)

There are also some special study centres. There is the Special Study Centre for the Army /Military personnel at Ilorin, a special centre for riveraine areas is been planned for Finima, in the Delta area. Other special centres will soon take off in the Prisons, where we already have pioneering efforts in one of the prisons in

Lagos. A number of Nigerian students based in China had approached the university to establish a Centre in China to meet their university education needs (Ipaye, 2007)

As of now every study centre is involved in complying frequently asked question with the aim of providing necessary information, advice and possibly counselling in student handbook and interactive audio and video disc

### **Conclusion**

.In the write up, the writer has defined communication, highlighted means of communication, purposes of communication, relationship between communication and counselling, conceptual frame work for communication in ODL, component of good communication, media selection and combination, media of counselling in NOUN, challenges of communication in counselling, and finally places of service delivery

**Recommendations:** For a counsellor to be effective in discharging his responsibilities he or she must attain a certain level of competency in communication skills, selection of appropriate media and efficient use of modern communication devices especially computer and internet facilities. More research work should be carried out in media of counselling in open and distance education. Counsellors should undergo constant training in the use of modern information and communication technologies in counselling especially computer and internet devices

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