Open and Distance Learning: Engaging Learners through Innovation and Creativity

Wardah Mohamad; Rosmah Mohamed
Open University Malaysia

Abstract

Open learning has increased in importance over the years as seen in the increasing number of universities offering open and distance learning programmes. Research in the area has also increased over the years, covering a multitude of topics and concentrating on areas such as e-learning, interactive learning and collaborative learning. The authors of this research suggested that academics and practitioners should explore how teachers or tutors can influence learning designs and strategies with the aim of engaging learners through innovation and creativity. This paper explores the avenues that can be pursued by Open University Malaysia to incorporate innovation and creativity into its blended learning mode. Data were gathered from a literature review on open and distance learning, print module, online learning, and face-to-face tutorial. The research thus provides information on the current practices of open and distance learning programmes in Open University Malaysia; and the basic principles of implementing these open and distance learning programmes. In particular, the findings provide the characteristics of an effective print module, online learning, and face-to-face tutorial. At the end of the paper, some innovative and creative ideas that can be implemented in Open University Malaysia were suggested and discussed.

Keywords: Open and distance learning, print module, online learning, face-to-face tutorial

Introduction

Open learning has increased in importance over the years as seen in the increasing number of universities offering open and distance learning (ODL) programmes. Research in the area has also increased over the years, covering a multitude of topics and concentrating on areas such as e-learning (Gallagher, 2007; Issack and Harrykrishna, 2008), and interactive and collaborative learning (Beritostiund, 2008; Chaves, 2009). Richardson and Newby (2006) suggested that academics and practitioners should explore how teachers or tutors can influence learning designs and strategies in order to engage learners in their learning activities. This paper attempts to explore the avenues that can be pursued by the OUM to incorporate innovation and creativity into its blended learning mode. In light of this objective, the literature on ODL, print module, online learning and face-to-face tutorial are reviewed and integrated with the authors' direct teaching experiences with ODL programmes in higher education institutions in Malaysia. This paper begins with an overview of the basic concepts of ODL. The OUM's current practices in its blended learning mode are then presented, followed by the discussion of findings and suggestions for future improvement. It was concluded that all stakeholders should be committed to the development of innovation and creativity in learning environment in order to engage learners.

Basic Concepts of Open and Distance Learning

ODL is generally used to refer to the applied strategy and policy of education applied by open universities (Lionarakis, 2008). ODL is becoming an essential and accepted component of the educational systems in both developed and developing countries. This development has been stimulated by the rapid advances in information and communication technology (ICT) and the effect of globalisation. The interest among teachers, tutors, and learners in the use of the Internet-based ICT has also stimulated the development of ODL. The terminology of ODL has been defined as a planned teaching or learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach distance learners and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification of learning (Lawhead et al., 1997). It

is often used interchangeably with open learning, distance teaching, e-learning, online learning, web-based learning, flexible and distance learning, and networked open learning (Davis, 1996; Stuart, 2007; McConnel, 1999; Grayharriman, 2009; Taniar, 2009; Wiki, 2009). Table 1 provides several ODL terminologies used interchangeably in the literatures.

Open learning ---is a learning philosophy which is not fixed in any particular way but maintains openness (in access, delivery and interpretation); it has a strong emphasis on flexibility, a learner centered philosophy (Davis, 1996)

Distance learning ---takes place when the instructor and the learner are not in the same physical location; same location but not at the same time. It is a form of open learning an focuses on learners. For an example, correspondence courses (Grayharriman, 2009)

E-learning ---combines digitally delivered content with learning support services e.g. web-based learning, computer-based learning (Wiki, 2009)

Online learning/web based learning ---takes place via a computer connected to the Internet (McConnel, 1999)

Blended learning ---combines several different delivery methods such as self-paced learning, online, and face-to-face meeting (Stuart, 2007)

Mobile learning ---learning via handheld devices such as PDAs, mobile phones and laptops (Taniar, 2009)

Table 1 Terminologies of ODL used in the literatures

There are various ODL models discussed in the literatures to understand the relationships amongst the variables of ODL. One of them is the simplified systems model. This model can be used to understand the relationships amongst the variables at work behind ODL. As depicted in Figure 1, moving from left to right, we find that in order to get the outputs and outcomes, the inputs and process must be synchronised and aligned to meet these said objectives.
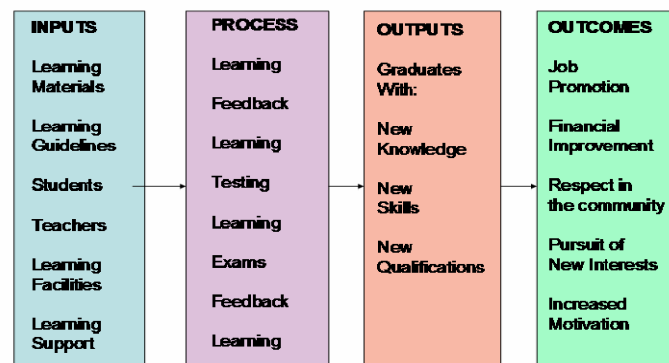

Figure 1 Simplified Systems Model of ODL

The quality of open learning is attested when the Open University in the United Kingdom received the highest rating in the United Kingdom for learner satisfaction for the third consecutive year in the 2007 National Student Survey (Gourley, 2008). In Malaysia, the OUM has also received several quality awards (Ali, 2008) such as the Runner-up for the Asia Pacific IT Award from the Asia Pacific ICT Association in October 2006; the E-learning Recognition Award from the Eszerhazy Karoly College of Hungary; and the Award in Excellence in Education Management from Kuala Lumpur Technology

Business Review in October 2007. Apart from this, the OUM's learning management system (myLMS) has also been adopted by several local and international open universities and colleges as their e-learning platform (Ali, 2008). Furthermore, in a paper titled "Borderless Education: Breaking Down Barriers through E-Learning and Effective Networking", the OUM's President Tan Sri Anuwar Ali (2008) stressed the need to provide quality education (Q-Education) through the utilisation of technology, sharing of Open Education Resources (OER), joint development of programmes, continuous enhancement of quality and effective sharing of best practices. The quality of these programmes and the desired level of learning transfer are achievable only with the necessary academic and social engagement aspects made possible through the right kinds of curricula design (Chaves, 2009). This is important as quality is the "lifeline of open universities" (Deming, 2008).

Quality in distance learning is the fitness for purpose in combination with exceptional high standards, perfection and consistency, value for money, and transformation capabilities (Ghande, 2009). Quality means the achievement of the expected levels of knowledge and skills, which can be used as a tool for further learning in the actual work experience in the learner's life (Stanny, 2008; Ghande, 2009). Quality thus includes the quality of curriculum design, instructional materials, assessment, customer satisfaction, external and technical reviews, evaluation and validation. Figure 2 illustrates the four areas of quality that should be covered in any ODL higher education institutions (Ghande, 2009).

Figure 2: Quality of open learning

Many factors have an impact on the quality of ODL including the establishment of a high quality teaching faculty, quality education resources, a well-established learning assistance, strict assessment system and comprehensive monitoring approaches (Deming, 2008).
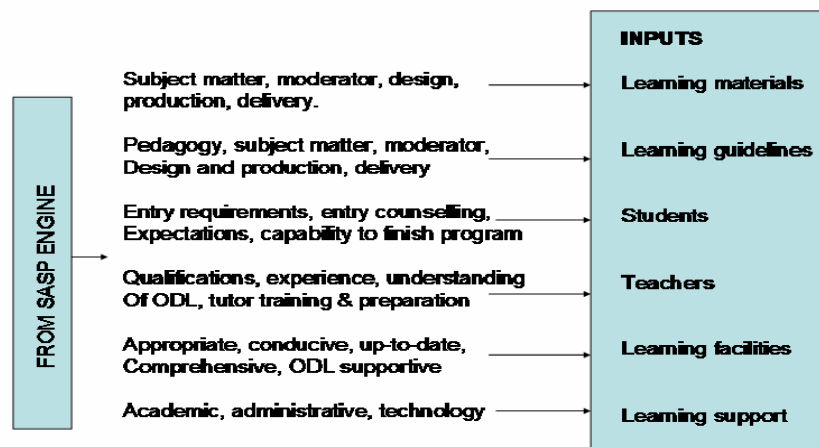
Figure 3 The System's Inputs and its Quality Elements

From Figure 3, we find that the quality of inputs is a cumulative of various factors which contribute to the level of learner satisfaction. Following Lawhead et al. (1997), ODL in the OUM is defined as a planned teaching or learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach distance learners and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification of learning. The OUM blended learning mode consists of self-managed learning through print modules and accompanying e-content; face-to-face interactions in classroom settings and online forum discussions through the university's myLMS (Abas and Fadzil, 2008). The focus of this paper is the enhancement of these three delivery modes. This focus is in line with the aim of delivering an effective, stimulating and high quality learning experience, which is crucial to any university's success (McDonald and Hall, 1996). Jarvis (2008) for example, iterated that the art of teaching is still possible in distance education through the people who design the teaching and learning process. According to him, the art of teaching lies in our empathising with the learners and thus entering into an interpersonal relationship with them. Teachers and designers have to embrace a human perspective, learn of methods, experiment with them and develop techniques using them (Jarvis, 2008). The next section section presents the OUM's current practices in its open distance learning programme.

Current Practices of ODL programmes in OUM

The OUM's current practices of ODL is represented by its blended learning mode, which can be segregated into self-managed learning, online learning, and face-to-face tutorials (Abas et al., 2008). The self-managed learning is supported by specially designed print modules, CDROM courseware, digital library, tangible library, peers, tutors and subject matter experts. The print module serves as the core learning material which drives all the other learning activities such as myLMS online discussions, face-to-face tutorials, iTutorials, learning objects, web-based modules, multimedia courseware, digital library resources and iRadio learning segments.

Face-to-face tutorials may consist of two hour sessions during the January, May and September semesters. These tutorials are divided into three sections: lesson review, discussion and end of session. The objective of the lesson review is to enhance learners' understanding of the topic content and to motivate them and spans around forty five to fifty minutes. The discussion section covers discussion of tutorial or assignment questions and learner queries, covering a period of half and hour to an hour. The last ten to twenty minutes of the tutorial is spent motivating learners and preparing them for the coming session.

OUM's online learning is facilitated using the univeristy's myLMS learning platform, which is aimed at strengthening learning. Tutors ensure that learners explore and learn important concepts and applications through the online discussion forums.

Research Methodology

This paper is a conceptual paper that explores the avenues that can be pursued by the OUM to incorporate innovation and creativity into its blended learning mode. A review of a range of literature related to ODL was employed as a method of data collection. In brief, OUM is a Malaysian-based higher education institution that provides ODL to working adult learners. It was established in August 2000 under the Private Higher Education Act 1996. At present, OUM has approximate 86,000 learners. OUM aims to attain a mega university status with an enrolment of more than 100,000 learners by 2010. OUM comprises of various departments including five faculties (Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, Faculty of Business and Management, Faculty of Education and Language, Faculty of Information Technology and Multimedia Communications, and Faculty of Science and Technology), five centres (Centre for Assessment of Prior Learning, Centre for Graduate Studies, Centre for Instructional Design and Technology, Centre for Student Management, and Centre for Tutor Management and Development), and 62 learning centres throughout the nation. This paper has selected the Faculty of Business and Management (FBM) programmes as the sample for the study due to the large number of learners registered under the programmes and the authors' expertise in the area.

Findings and Discussions

This section presents the discussion of the findings on print module, online learning management system, and face-to-face tutorial of FBM programmes at OUM. Several enhancement ideas for future FBM programmes to engage learners were suggested through the discussions. The purpose for the enhancements is to incorporate innovation and creativity in the blended modes in order to engage learners in the learning process.

FBM Print Modules

Stanny (2008) suggested that the quality of print materials or modules can be judged by the structure and layout, learning outcomes, introduction and content, diagrams, charts, tables, graphs, illustrations, questions, activities, summaries and reviews. Print modules should also be attractive. Currently, the FBM's modules cover the prerequisite introduction, learning outcomes, topic review, body of content, summary, key terms, and references. The content of the topic also includes learning activities and self-check questions to help test learners' understanding of the subject matter.

According to Stanny (2008), one of the most important criteria for a quality print module is that it should include learner learning outcomes that cover the following domains:
- Content – discipline, knowledge and skills;
- Critical thinking – skills in analysis, synthesis and evidence;
- Communication – speaking and writing;
- Intergrity/values – academic integrity and discipline-specific ethical issues; and
- Project management – self-regulation and team-work skills.

Thus, it is not enough that learner learning outcomes are included at the beginning of each topic, but that it should actually cover the above-stated criteria. The learner learning outcomes in the FBM modules can be further improved by taking these criteria into consideration. For example,
- instead of "define planning", which requires learners to simply recite the definition of planning, we can change this to "enumerate or illustrate what is planning" which would require learners to not only define planning but also give examples of what planning is;

- instead of "define management by objectives", we can change this to "devise your own management by objectives" which would enable learners to apply the knowledge in the topic into their own lives; and
- instead of "describe" or "explain" the "strengths and weaknesses of group decision making", we can change this to "analyse" where learners should be able to use their creative thinking skills instead of merely reciting the contents of the topic at hand.

The aim of this is to increase the quality of learning to a higher standard according to Bloom's (1956) taxonomy.

Another way of improving the print module would be through case studies which would enliven the module and make the content more interesting and real. Case studies would also encourage learners to integrate theory with practice. Cases can be included in the print modules but discussion may be conducted online or in the face-to-face tutorials. Use of case studies would enhance analytical techniques, appreciation of implications and increase exposure to real world problems (Gallagher, 2007). Case studies or caseletes are thus suggested for FBM's print modules.

Reflective writing can help learners become more self-directed learners. Print modules can include prompts for reflective writing to encourage learners to think about areas that they have read. For example, "Describe the similarity between the management methods you have just read and those which are practised in your organisation"; and "What was the most useful thing that you learned in this chapter?"

One way of integrating innovation and creativity in the print modules would be to include cartoons which relate to the topic on hand. Cartoons would provide a brief respite from the tedious act of reading while at the same time stimulate learners to think about a given situation or topic. Figure 4 illustrates examples of cartoon that can be included in the print modules.

Figure 4 Samples of cartoons that can be included in the print modules

Another way of enhancing the FBM modules would be to add "snippets" of news from newspapers or magazines which would also act as stimulus to the learners' learning process. This addition can be included in all FBM modules. A possible example is presented in Figure 5.

Page last updated at 12:57 GMT, Friday, 26 September 2008 13:57 UK

How Safe Is My Money?

The global economy has just experienced one of the most tumultuous weeks ever seen, with shocking headlines every day:
Analysts say it is the worst turmoil since the crash of 1929!

The collapse of 150-year-old US investment bank Lehman Brothers; the merging of HBOS and Lloyds TSB to create a UK super-bank; the US government bailing out insurance company AIG to the tune of $85bn; stock prices sent tumbling... and then climbing again on news that the US may yet buy up all toxic mortgage debts.
On Monday, in a change to TV schedules, Panorama's Jane Corbin asks How Safe Is My Money? And looks at what impact the current turmoil will have on our banks, mortgages and pensions.
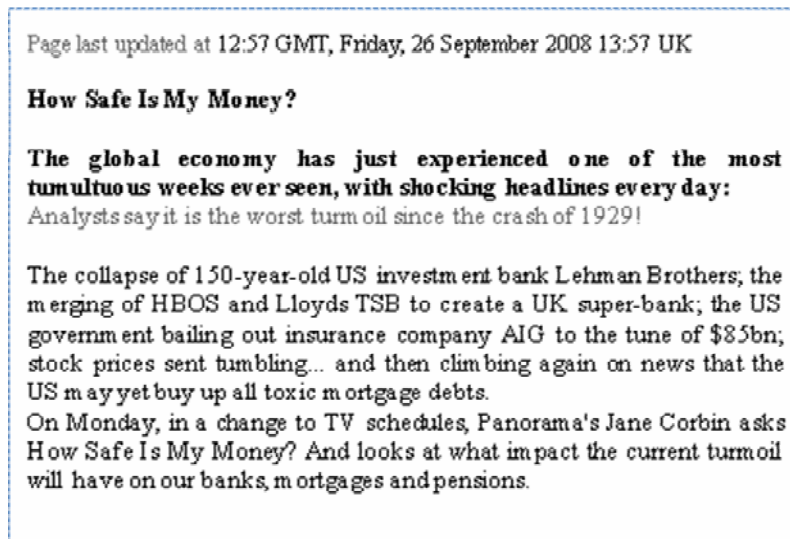
Figure 5 Possible example of a snippet of news

Online Learning Management System

Developing adult-appropriate curricula for e-learning poses an even greater challenge than achieving involvement and interaction in the traditional on-campus setting (Chaves, 2009). The learning content should emerge based on learners' interest and the nature of group interaction (Susilo, 2008). In a learning community that allows for a high degree of flexibility, there should be support from teachers or experts to guarantee the efficacy of the learning model employed (Chaves, 2009). Teachers or tutors should encourage independence in the learners and motivate them them to construct their learning (Abas and Fadzil, 2008). In fact, the success of an online community depends on the crucial roles played by the designers, teachers and learners (Karunanayaka, 2008). This is especially important for OUM as Abas and Kaur (2004) found that OUM learners depended on their tutors to ensure their success in online learning.

When designing online teaching, the course contents should no longer be the object of the activity but are perceived as tools to help learners achieve their learning objectives (Issack and Harrykrishna, 2008). In an online community, learners can communicate using textual discussion, audio, video or other internet supported services (Karunanayaka, 2008).

Interactivity is regarded as an important factor in online learning environments (Issack and Harrykrishna, 2008; Kawachi, 2003; Northrup, 2001). Moore (2006) divided interaction into Learner-learner interaction (LLI) and Learner-instructor interaction (LLI). LLI refers to the interaction between learners and other learners while LLI refers to interaction between learners and the instructors. According to Moore (2006) these instructors have the opportunity to organise the learners' and provide them with the necessary guidance and feedback. The role of the instructors is to motivate the learners and to convince them where their interests lie (Issack and Harrykrishna, 2008). Morgan (2006) found that learners appreciated the 'closeness' with their instructors where they intepreted 'closeness' as the feeling that their instructor was travelling with them on a learning journey. Morgan recommended that instructors convey warmth, encouragement and enthusiasm, humour and sentiment in their interaction with learners.

Abas and Fadzil (2008) recommended that teachers or tutors link the subject taught with real life issues pertaining to the subject matter. This view is supported by Smith et al., (2008) who advocates the sharing of experiences through debate, critical reflections and problem solving tasks linking the subject material to application in practice.

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As in the print modules, myLMS can be inserted with cartoons, animations and caselets pertaining to the subject matter. Frequent use of learners' names, humour, encouragement, frequent contact and personal examples can further improve this interaction process (Chaves, 2009). Ulrich (2008) cited several examples where dynamic elements were used in learning resources. Animations or interactive simulations replace static pictures in the original course content. Games can also be included to apply knowledge by hands-on training (Ulrich, 2008). Some examples that can be implemented include a business case simulation for management and human resource management programmes; and strategic games for strategic management programmes.

Learners generally do not care about the technologies behind the process but they expect their communications, information and services to improve their learning within the constraints of their lifestyle as adult distance learners (Gallagher, 2007). Edirisingha (2009) found that learners benefited from online interaction because communicating with peers developed their self-confidence. Some learners were not confident giving views in the face-to-face sessions and thus using the online forum was important to their satisfaction.

The design of the course content can also include descriptions of how learners can use the content, how the content fits into a larger framework and alternative ways to apply the content (Haverita et al., 2009). This is done to encourage reflection, an effective adult learning strategy. Another idea is to give online quizzes. The quizzes might contain four or five multiple choice questions selected to help learners focus on target issues in the module. The OUM could also use the authentic experience based learning strategy for their adult learners. Under this strategy, learners use their own experience to improve their learning process (Haverita et al., 2009). Projects can be given to learners too, as long as the schedule is accommodative enough, with the expectations clearly spelt out along with a specific time frame (Haverila and Barkhi, 2009). These projects should encourage creative thinking and reflection.

Ostlund (2008) found that learners visited online tutorials when they were motivated for their own needs or had time for it. Online interaction will be successful if learners perceive that collaboration and interaction will contribute to their learning more than the time and flexibility lost because of it (Ostlund, 2008). Gallagher (2007) found that learners faced problems in using case studies online. However, this was solved when there was exposure to peer group solution and lecturer driven solutions, which enhanced the learning process. Interactive learning could also be incorporated into FBM's programme using simulation games or business scenarios. Learners could bid for contracts in Finance courses, develop business plans for management courses or develop marketing strategies for marketing courses.

Face-to-face Tutorial

Ostlund (2008) in his study found that although learners appreciated distance learning, they found face-to-face meetings to be essential as they could communicate better this way. Learners also found face-to-face sessions to be memorable and that these sessions helped them to communicate better in follow-up online tutorials (Jakobsdottir, 2008). Face-to-face tutorials can be more interesting with the use of debates and oral presentations (Bruce, 1992) and seminar-type group discussions (Bruce, 1992).

One way to engage learners in face-to-face tutorials is by creating variety. Variation can have a powerful effect on the audience. Even moving from the front to the back of the classroom can increase the learner's attention. The following are examples that can be emulated in future FBM face-to-face tutorials. These examples have been tested by the authors in their own classes and proven to be effective for enhancing learning through creativity and fun.

An effective way of introducing variety to the tutorial is to use peer teacher and learning. For example, in a Strategic Management tutorial, divide the tutorial into groups and assign each group to analyse the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities or threats of OUM. The findings of the ten minute

discussion are then presented in class where the TOWS matrix is illustrated using a real-life example and learners have engaged in critical thinking. A short debate can also be held to develop learners' research skills and encourage them to organise their thoughts in a critical or argumentative manner. Use debate when the important issues for the tutorial contain pros and cons to a particular subject matter. For an example, a short debate on "Strategic Business Units versus Matrix Structure as the better divisional structure" in Strategic Management tutorial.

Role playing is another way of making the tutorial interesting and learners more active. Role playing will increase learners' awareness of the interconnectedness of knowledge and the subtle complexities of situations. Role playing can also expand personal experience through simulation. As an example, the authors used role play to illustrate the different cultural norms amongst Americans, Japanese and Arabs in an International Management class. Learners were separated into groups and given ten minutes to read the background on the assigned cultural norms and then given a further ten minutes to role play the Americans, Japanese and Arabs. Learners found the exercise interesting and managed to retain the knowledge on the different cultural norms. Often, the antics of role play result in laughter, and enjoyment which served to invigorate tired learners.

In another session, learners started off the class with an excerpt from theme song from "Rosalinda" a Spanish sitcom which their lecturer loved (good thinking on the part of the learners!). They then proceeded to portray the Spanish culture of delaying things by constantly saying "manana" "manana" (pronounced as "manyana") which means "tomorrow" at meetings, appointments and even dates!! Another unforgettable memory was a role-play in which three learners brought in actual bowling balls to the class and acted out a decision making scenario while bowling! The suspense built at the beginning of the class was sustained throughout the whole session and during the class, the learners managed to understand, analyse, build and review the various concepts involved in decision making.

Case studies can also be used to liven the tutorials, with learners presenting their solutions to cases included in the print module. Learners will have the opportunity to develop their thinking skills and will have the chance to voice out their ideas in front of their peers. A sharing of ideas will promote a healthy teamwork within the learners and encourage them to attend future tutorials. The presentations can be either formal or informal, but formal presentation has the advantage of building confidence in the presenters and also provides them with the opportunity of showing off their skills in front of their peers. This is especially good in OUM's case as the learners are mostly working adults who can bring in their experience into the classroom. Examples of presentations can thus be in the form of chief executive officers presenting an acquisition strategy to the board, a marketing manager presenting a sales presentation of OUM programmes or an accountant presenting an audit statement.

Another way to stimulate learner interest in tutorials is through the use of creative scenarios or simulations. For example,
•   in an Entrepreneurship tutorial, learners may be asked to simulate how they would start their own company including developing a concise business plan during the time given;
•   in a Strategic Management tutorial, learners can illustrate the use of the BCG Matrix or the GE matrix;
•   in an Accounting tutorial, learners can calculate the ratios or develop profit and loss statements in a given time frame; and
•   in a Law tutorial, learners can present a court presentation of a chosen case where the prosecution and defence goes to trial.

Using these simulations allow learners to think and apply the concepts learnt in the print module and online learning to the "real-world" as presented in the tutorial. A simulation which stands out in the mind of the authors is a simulation presented by learners in an economic class which went along these lines:
"Pa…please gives me some money…I need to buy some new clothes for the graduation party…" said the daughter of a Chinese man.

"Darling, darling....me also...Parkson got sale ma...I want to get a red handbag, and a blue one, and a green one......you old man but still handsome one!!!" said the wife.

"Pa, what la these ladies...shopping, shopping, shopping only...Can you just please pay for my car instalment?" said the son.

"Aiya....I die like this...I work, work, work...you all spend, spend, spend...everyday price increase, last time hundred dollars enough, now one thousand also not enough!!" sighed the head of the household...

By the end of the sketch, learners were laughing at the antics of the four learners who acted as father, mother, son and daughter. It was just ten minutes, but the learners illustrated their understanding of inflation and the whole class mastered the principles behind and the formula for calculating inflation.

Conclusion

Open learning has increased in importance over the years as seen in the increasing number of universities offering open and distance learning programmes. Research in the area has also increased covering the many aspects of open and distance learning. Whatever improvements that we embark on, it is very important that we keep in mind Bloom's Taxonomy – that the process of learning and therefore, the objective of the print modules, online learning and face-to-face tutorials should be to create, evaluate, analyse, apply, understand and retain the knowledge that the learners require (Bloom, 1956).

The burden of improving the print modules, online learning and face-to-face tutorial should not be borne by the writers of the modules, developer of the online material or specific tutors but shared by everybody working on the specific course. OUM should also provide training on how to integrate innovation and creativity in the learning process. This training can be conducted by experienced staff to save costs and also be a platform for the sharing of ideas and diffusion of knowledge. As a university, it is our responsibility to facilitate the learning process. As a teacher, tutor or instructor, it is our responsibility to enhance the learning process and ensure that the knowledge imparted is retained and applied by the learners. This is summed up by Gallagher (2007) and Jarvis (2008) respectively:

Gallagher (2007, 3):
Learners want to learn; they want to broaden their horizons and they want to communicate. Simply put, they are today's investment capital; they are the means of future production and as such require access to the most effective and efficient learning available to further these objectives.

Jarvis (2008, 113):
We can help build or we can hinder the process of building full human persons by the method of our teaching – this is the responsibility of the teacher – it is more than a science – more than an art – it is the moral responsibility that is laid upon all of us who have the courage to teach.

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