THE POTENTIAL AND CHALLENGES OF INTRODUCING NEW TECHNOLOGY IN DISTANCE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

One of the most significant recent technological developments at the Zimbabwe Open University has been the introduction of the CD-ROM digital text as the central medium of instruction. The ZOU has always used tutorials and the module as the main delivery mode. However, the advent of the global village, advancement in new technology and the socio-economic and political challenges Zimbabwe experienced in the past two years from 2008 to 2009 forced ZOU to adopt an alternative medium of instruction (CD-ROM digital text) in order to survive. However, the introduction of the CD-ROM text has become a topical issue that has raised heated debate in ZOU's departmental, faculty and senate meetings. Those supporting the use of CDs have argued that ZOU must adopt new technology in order to survive in today's computer age and in the global village. On the other hand, critics have seen the use of CD-ROM as one way of abandoning the distant and the socio-economically disadvantaged student!

This article reports the findings of a university-wide study the two authors conducted at the ZOU during the 2nd Semester (July-December 2009) in order to contribute meaningfully to the current debate on challenges ZOU and other ODL institutions are facing the introduction of new technology in their delivery mode. The present study focused on three key issues;
➢ students' preparedness in the use of CD –ROM in their studies,
➢ whether students found CDs convenient to use and
➢ what ZOU should do to improve effectiveness of CD-ROM in the teaching and learning process.

We collected data through a questionnaire from a stratified random sample of 100 undergraduate students 25 students from each of the following faculties; Arts and Education, Sciences, Commerce and Law and Social Sciences.

This study found that the majority of ZOU students were not ready and prepared to use the CD-ROM as only 34% of ZOU students were computer literate, 5% had personal computers, 12% had computers either at home or at their workplace. Fifty-eight percent of those students with access to computers reported inconveniences from other members of the family or workmates when using the computer for their studies. The majority of students (72%), experienced financial challenges in the use of CD-ROM due to high costs charged at inter-net cafes and for printing the module. The major implications of the present study are that:
1. Before introducing new technology, ODL institutions must conduct a survey to determine the extent to which students are ready and prepared to use the new technology effectively.
2. ODL institutions must know and understand who their students are, their characteristics and the domestic environment in which they operate.
3. ODL institutions must provide the resources (equipment and software) and training for students when introducing new technology.
4. ODL institutions must provide access and technical support to students to ensure the effective use of new technologies.

Key words: New technology, distance teaching, distance learning.