

**EXPERIENCES WITH THE USE OF THE COURSE TEAM
APPROACH IN DEVELOPING AND PRODUCING
INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS: A CASE FOR ZIMBABWE
OPEN UNIVERSITY (ZOU)**

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Background of the study

Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) has been mandated to transmit knowledge through the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) allowing learners to develop their full potential in an affordable and flexible manner. (Government of Zimbabwe, 1998:245). ZOU is housed in all the ten provinces of Zimbabwe and it also operates a virtual region which is found at ZOU'S National Center. In total, ZOU has eleven regions.

ODL focuses on increasing educational access and increasing educational choice (Col, 2005). The dominant feature of distance education is the physical and often temporal distance that separate the learner and the teacher (Gunawardena, 1988). Thus these learners demand appropriate learner support for them to achieve their educational goals. Provision of ideal instructional materials to a distance learner is one aspect of learner support. In ZOU, the print mode takes the centre stage and is the spring board of other multimedia facilities used to disseminate instructional materials to learners. The course team approach is used to design and develop ZOU's instructional materials. Members of the course team comprise of staff members from faculties, Materials Development Unit and Quality Assurance Unit. Members of the above units work together to produce quality learning materials. Personnel Deans, chairpersons, programme leaders, coordinators, authors, content reviewers, editors, desktop publishers, graphic designers, quality assurance are based in these units. The development of quality instructional materials is the responsibility of the above personnel. ODL learning materials should be purposeful, structured, paced and engaging (Rowntree, 1994). Col (2005) posits that

team players should be aware of their responsibilities in the development and production process, that is” who does what “and “who is responsible for what”.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study is to examine the experiences of that team players have in the use of the course team approach in the development and production of instructional materials in order to promote the production of high quality learning materials.

Statement of the problem

In Open and distance learning settings the learner is in charge of his own learning. Instructional materials are especially designed to promote self-directed learning. Instructional materials ought to be user-friendly and self- contained to promote adequate guidance and independence to a distance learner as he/she tries to accomplish the educational needs.ZOU uses the course team approach in developing its instructional materials. Thus the study sought to analyze the impact of the course team approach in developing instructional materials.

Research Questions

What is the course team approach in developing instructional materials?

What are the benefits of the course team approach in developing instructional materials.?

What challenges do team players face in the instructional development process?

Objectives

To establish the benefits of the use of course team approach in development and production of learning materials.

To identify challenges encountered by course team members in the development and production process

To come up with solutions to the challenges encountered in the use of course team approach in developing ZOU’s instructional materials

Open and Distance learning (ODL)

Open and distance learning (ODL) is a way of acquiring knowledge while the learner is away from the conventional learning institution. At the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), the Materials Development Unit has the mandate to develop and produce multi-media learning materials that suit the learner who is isolated for most of the learning time. As an ODL

institution, ZOU whose main aim is to produce quality learning materials that stimulate the learner to find out more and to promote individuals' quest to achieve their goals, is bound to be faced with a lot of challenges. ODL materials, which are a product of collaboration by multi-talented, multi-skilled personnel who come from varying educational and professional backgrounds, ought to be very effective for the lone learner to understand the concepts without the assistance of a tutor. The input of course teams calls for dedication and creativity in order to not only attract learners but also facilitate their learning while they work or while they attend to family issues.

Knowledge about the concept of ODL would assist instructional developers in what to consider in their deliberations to promote human development and achieve the goal for knowledge production through appropriate ODL Learning materials(Keegan,1994).

Course Development

A course is a series of lessons that can be offered during a stipulated period. Course developers need to acquire the knowledge and skills to develop appropriate courses. There is need to establish or refine the course development procedures to ensure the timely development of high quality and effective course materials. In addition ideal course developers should come with course outlines in order to produce ideal materials. Furthermore course design involves looking at all the elements of a course and ensuring that they are integrated in most educationally appropriate and cost effective ways. Thus Course materials are a result of programme development and course design activities.

The way they are presented and used is determined by how they are structured and this calls for a course team approach.

Course developers need to consider the following when developing instructional materials:

- Course developers should have a good insight into what constitutes good course materials and the criteria for course development.
- There should be good understanding of which areas need to be improved in current set of materials.
- Good understanding of course design process.
- Course developers should have Knowledge of how to approach the development of a course using distance education methods.

- Knowledge about underlying principles of development is essential
- Deeper course writing skills as a result of redeveloping identified sections or units promotes course development
- Ongoing evaluation of the course as a way of building quality is essential
- Improving existing course materials and streamlining the course development process.

Course development process

The aim of an institution is to develop a cadre of students who have developed the necessary competences. Special attention should be given to particular areas follows:

Areas of attention in Module development

- Need for a consistent house –style
- Dialogue with learners
- Experience in development process
- Context of learners
- Helping learners to learn
- Establishing and maintaining a dialogue with learners
- Writers should be encouraged to view the learners as active participants in learning process

Emphasis should also be placed in the following areas:

1. Introduce the experience and context of the learners

- Learners come to the learning environment with previous knowledge, skills and life experiences.
- Learners have a rich life experience base.
- Challenge for writers is to lead the learners gradually into the discourse of the particular discipline.

2. Use a variety of methods and techniques to help learners

- Use in text activities and self-test exercises to encourage learners to check their progress in the units.
- Encourage learners to take ownership of their own learning.

- Allow for different ways in which learners learn.

3. Arrange the content according to the learning logic

- Headings used are usually those that follow the logic of the content
- Headings draw learners attention
- Purpose of headings
- Scanning the headings- learner get a view of the main points
- Headings used to chunk the learning into manageable bits
- Headings can provide coherence across the unit

4. Introduce a range of relevant examples of grades complexity

- Explain difficult concepts with a lot of examples
- Writers should guide learners from simple and familiar to more complex
- Ways to help learners handle new and unfamiliar words and terms
- Include the explanation of the word or term in the text
- Encourage the learners to find meaning of the word.
- Include activities that invite learners to look up difficult words
- Ongoing glossary showing meanings of words in the margin- use analogies that learners are familiar with to help learners to understand difficult concepts

5. Present a variety of relevant activities that show a good range of difficulty

- Course development team should be clear about the range of skills that learners have to acquire and then design the activities that show variety and a good range of difficulty

Writers should consider that;

- Illustrations must be contextually relevant and meaningful
- Diagram must be well drawn, simple and easy to understand
- Illustration or diagram must be linked to the text- well positioned to enable learners to easily link text and illustrations.
- Diagrams must be numbered and clearly labelled
- Summaries help consolidate what have been learnt and used for revision purposes.

Establish and maintain dialogue with the learners

- Make use of introductions
- Link experiences or concepts learnt in previous units or what will be covered in subsequent units
- Feedback on activities is an excellent way of creating dialogue
- A rule of the thumb is to place yourself in the shoes of your learners

Course Team Approach

Team approaches provide the most logical solution to service delivery. The approach is discipline oriented with each team member responsible only for activities related to his or her own discipline (Rothberg, 1981; Melvin, 1989). Team approaches have been derived from the human relations model of management. Because of economic realities tertiary educators are compelled to consider new delivery strategies and approaches to developing lifelong learners. Overallly purposes of Higher education include the provision of general educational experience resulting in subject-base disciplinary knowledge, personal transferable skills and generic academic outcomes (Allan, 1996; Atkins, 1995). ZOU's mission statement stipulates that individuals should be empowered though lifelong learning in an affordable and flexible manner. Therefore the provision of ideal learner support is mandatory. Instructional materials as one aspect provided by ZOU, should be of high quality in order for the learner to achieve their goals. Thus employing Multidisciplinary approaches to service delivery means that persons from several disciplines are involved in delivery services. The team approach in developing instructional materials, no doubt, falls in this camp. Team players such as Materials Development Unit, Faculties, Quality Assurance department share the responsibility of developing and producing high quality learning materials for Zimbabwe Open University.

Qualities of team members

Teaming is an intentional strategy used for specific purposes. A team is defined as a small number of people fewer than 20 or even 6 with complementary skills (ACE Department Chair on line Resource; Glen, 2005). We need to understand what teams are, when they are appropriate and how to establish an environment in which they can thrive. The following are some of the expected complementary skills;

- People with a common purpose

- People who have the ability to hold each other mutually accountable
- People who have a common working approach.
- People who have ground rules or charter

Furthermore complementary skills of a team also include;

- Technical ability
- Problem- solving ability
- Communication skills

Note that it is rare to find all those skills in one person. However teams ought to engage in an open, honest dialogue and learn from mistakes in an atmosphere of trust. Needless to say a team with the above complementary skills is bound to produce a quality product. Hence products of a team are mostly collective or joint efforts. In ZOU qualities of team players listed above rest in the various staff members who are involved in the development and production of the instructional materials since they are experts in their respective fields or areas.

Development of a team

Teams address a particular issue. The following questions should be considered if one is to use a team approach;

1. Does the project or challenge require outcomes from two or more people?
2. Will leadership roles shift among the people involved as team becomes involved in different aspects of the issue or project?
3. Are team members mutually and individually accountable?
4. Does the work cross departments within the institution?

If the answer is yes to most questions then a team approach can be adopted.

Team skills and collaboration need to be supported through different pedagogies and processes such as;

- Establish climate of trust, openness
- Communication protocols
- Resolution of conflict
- Group processes support
- Aspects of task definition
- Resources to support the project

Thus team approach uses collegial approach and follows methods based on trust and professionalism. Tertiary educators are compelled to consider new delivery strategies and approaches to developing lifelong learners. In real life contexts, work in teams, sharing knowledge and transforming it through discussions. Professionals have a body of expertise as well as life-long learning skills and self-direction (Boud, 1988). Self-direction includes elements of independence, dependence, interdependence. Our ZOU student being lifelong learners have an element of self-direction. Therefore does the quality of our instructional materials promote this element of self-direction? How are team players ensuring this element?

Team Effectiveness

Team meetings are important part of team effectiveness. They need to be structures to provide accountability. Team meetings should be more action oriented. The following questions assess team effectiveness;

1. Are team members arriving at meetings on time?
2. Are team members prepared for meetings?
3. Are meetings organized?
4. Does the team follow the agenda?
5. Do members contribute equally?
6. Is team achieving desired results?

Common Team Dysfunctions

The following are some of the causes of team failure as cited by Allan & Phleps(2000)

- Absence of trust
- Fear of conflict
- Lack of commitment
- Avoidance of accountability
- Inattention to results

There is need to come up with strategies to deal with the above areas of team failure. Firstly for absence of trust, it is better to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the team. There is need to inspect each member conflict style to help in combating conflict when it arises. Members should be committed to their tasks to come up with a good product . ZOU's materials development team is responsible for particular tasks in the development process and members are accountable for

specifies activities under their jurisdiction. Thus the team should remain focused to achieve the intended goal. i.e. the production of high quality instructional materials.

ODL and Instructional Materials

ODL instructors need to use different techniques and methodologies if they are to deliver effective teaching in ODL environment. As mentioned earlier on, effective learning materials have to be purposeful, structured, paced and engaging (Rowntree, 1994). The purpose of the study or the programme should be reflected by the learner's achievements at the end. The specific objectives will guide the student to the desired goal. Structure of the learning module is of paramount importance in maintaining learner's interest. It should be clear to allow learners to have considerable control over their learning. ZOU has a particular house style which assists learners in their journey to learn. Materials Development Unit staff ensures that the ZOU house style is reflected in the instructional materials. It should be noted that distance learners can feel extremely isolated and a feeling of control provides an element of self-confidence. Pacing distance learners need to know how much time to spend on a given learning package otherwise they lose sight of the track calendar of events guides the students. More so assessments are also used to guide the learner. Both learner to learner and learner to tutor interface also ensure that learners maintain an appropriate pace. It is the responsibility of all team players to observe set deadlines to keep pace with University's expectations. (Rowntree, 1994).

Engagement

Learning materials should engage the learners in the process of learning. Instructional materials need to provide a context for learning that supports both autonomy and relatedness in order for learners to take control of their learning and building on their past experiences. Vygotsky (1986) emphasizes an aspect of scaffolding to be present in modules and pedagogy. With proper scaffolding learners can be challenged to move smoothly from what is known to what is to what to be known. ZOU's faculties are responsible for developing the manuscript should take scaffolding into consideration. In constructivist learning environment learners acquire knowledge by constantly assuming and accommodating new information basing on existing knowledge. Constructivism recognize that autonomy exists on two levels. These two levels are the freedom of learners to choose learning resources as well as freedom to exercise and express critical thinking. Constructivism enables learners to negotiate meaning and construct reality

(Woolfork,1993).Needless to say adult learners engage engage on particular programmes in order to solve real life problems.

The role of the instructor is to provide the learners with collaborative situation that supports critical reflection and allows them to draw experiential processes. The instructor is a guide,facilitator and a coach. Learning is a result of learners existing knowledge, the social context and the problem to be solved(Tam,2000). In ZOU the course team has the responsibility to develop effective instructional materials for learners to attain their educational goals.

The Course Team in the Development and Production Process in ZOU

There should be standard competencies and qualifications of members of the course team to ensure the quality of learning materials meets the specified criteria set by the institution(Wallace,1992) In ZOU the Course Team includes Faculties (Deans, Chairperson, Programme Leaders, Writers, Content Reviewers etc), MDU staff – (Manager, Editors, Production Planner, Desktop Publishers, Graphic Designers, Information Records Clerks), Quality Assurance Personnel and Printing Press Personnel. Each course team member should hold particular qualifications in order to handle the various activities. For example module writers have to meet particular criteria i.e. competence in respective field in order to produce quality materials. The development of course materials should involve course team approach I to ensure quality of content, design, and delivery of suitable instructional materials for a distance learner.

Responsibilities of the team players are laid out in their procedure manuals. Perhaps we need to mention that the development process starts with the faculties who have the responsibility of generating the manuscript which is then submitted to MDU for development and production.

There are also some checks and balances which are employed at each stage of development and production. Thus the issue of quality is the responsibility of all the team players in the development and production process although the final node of mass production rests with quality department of ZOU. Needless to say the design, development and production of learning materials involve course team approach to ensure quality of content, design and delivery suitable for distant learning. Collaboration, communication as well as coordination of course team members calls for great commitment of the people involved to produce quality learning materials at the expected times(Dekker,1994) Below are the roles of the various team players in

the development and production of ZOU'S instructional materials.....

Methodology

The philosophy underpinning this study was the qualitative research paradigm. The case study method and the case study design was found appropriate for the study. The design enabled the researchers to carry out an in-depth study of the phenomena that is the use of the course team approach in developing learning materials. Furthermore the design allowed participants to elicit their views about the use of this particular approach.(Silverman,2004: Creswell,2007)

Population and sampling

The population was made up of team players involved in the development and production at Zimbabwe Open University. A convenience sampling was drawn from this population.The population comprised of team players involved in the development and production of instructional materials. Participants were drawn from Faculties, Materials Development Unit and Quality Development Personnel. A purposive sample of information –rich respondents was drawn from the above population.(Yin,2009)

Data collection and Analysis

Data was collected using structured interviews and some documentary analysis was also done. Procedure manuals from the various stakeholders were analysed especially the section relevant to development and production of instructional materials. Data was analysed using content analysis and SPSS package. Themes were derived from the data collected and the results are presented in the next section.

Results

The results are presented in the order of the research questions which were raised during the course of the research data collection.

A total of thirteen (13) lecturers took part in the research. These were from the four faculties in the ZOU. They comprised both male and female lecturers. They were also members of various course teams in the faculties.

The data analysis gave rise to six thematic structures. In each theme the aspects are presented in the order of importance. The first one is the one which was mentioned by more participants and the last had few participants mentioning it. We present these below.

What is the course team approach in developing instructional materials?

The theme on the role of the course team approach in developing instructional materials is captured in Table 1. They were three aspects from the participants.

Table 1: Theme: Role of the course Team

Thematic Structure	Participants
Collaborative system of producing instructional materials	5
Group members that develop learning materials	4
Team members from various departments	4

Although participants did not mention the issue of quality assurance as part of the course team they attributed this to ignorance as depicted here:

Most faculty members do not recognise the importance of Quality Assurance Department in the development of instructional materials.

Table 2 shows those they feel should be members of the course team. We noted that they placed subject experts as important members of the course team.

Table 2: Theme: Members of Course Team Approach

Thematic Structure	Participants
Team players from relevant departments (faculty, MDU quality departments)	7
Experts in subject areas	5

What are the benefits of the course team approach in developing instructional materials?

The thematic structure in Table 3 shows that participants have experienced or are aware of benefits which accrue when the course team is used.

Table 3: Theme: Benefits of Course Team

Thematic Structure	Participants
Quality production	5
Shared expertise	5
Production of better products	4
Shared ownership	3

This statement form one of them summaries this observation:

We are aware that the benefit of the use of the course team approach.

The respondents also revealed the essence of team approach in developing instructional materials.

The thematic structure in Table 4 clearly shows who the main drivers of the course team are. In main instances it has been difficult to pinpoint the main drivers of materials development. Participants are emphatic that this should be an academic responsibility with support from MDU and other related members.

Table 4: Theme: Drivers of Course Team

Thematic Structure	Participants
Faculties (Dean, Chairperson, Coordinator, Program Leaders)	9
MDU	5
Every member	2

Drivers of the course team approach were seen to be hinged together.

What challenges do team players face in the instructional development process?

Table 5 captures the various challenges which were met by the course team members. Lack of training was brought up by most of the participants. Despite that ZOU has done some training in

module writing, participants still feel that this area still needs urgent attention. Failure to meet deadlines encompassed the production of the module and also the payment for services rendered by various stakeholders.

Table 5: Theme: Challenges of Course Team Approach

Thematic Structure	Participants
Lack of adequate training	7
Failure to meet deadlines	6
Coordination	5
Commitment	2
Inadequate time for meetings	1
Payment delays	1

This is captured in the following statements from three of the participants:

Team members should be committed to carry out given tasks.

Team members should have team spirit and respect each other.

Course Team members should observe given deadlines to complete given tasks.

Challenges can be overcome and Table 6 summarises how the participants felt this can be done.

Table 6: Theme: How can we overcome the challenges?

Thematic Structure	Participants
Training	7
Team Building	2
Commitment	2
Adequate Resources	1
Coordination	1
Meetings	1

Two aspects are fundamental for this to occur. These are training as captured a statement from one of them:

Team members need training in the use of the course team approach.

The other one is team building. In their experiences participants noted that:

Team building is of vital importance.

Without the above aspects participants point out that the course team approach is doomed to failure.

Discussion

This study endeavored to meet these objectives: to establish the benefits of the use of course team approach in development and production of learning materials; identify challenges encountered by course team members in the development and production process; and come up with solutions to the challenges encountered in the use of course team approach in developing ZOU's instructional materials.

The findings of the study indicate that the course team is indeed being used in developing materials at ZOU. This is in line with Rothberg, 1981 and Melvin 1989 descriptions of what course team approaches should achieve. This is an indication that the ZOU is following world benchmarked processes in the development of ODL materials.

The study also shows that course team members should be experts in the area they are writing. The research from Wallace (1992) concurs with the above. What needs further interrogation is whether these ZOU course teams have expertise in all of the subjects they are writing in.

It is obvious from the findings that they are a lot of challenges being experienced in the development of learning materials by the course team. The challenge of training is collaborated by research (Keegan, 1994). Lack of training is the weak link in the development of learning materials at the ZOU. The ZOU needs to heed Modesto and Tau's (2009) recommendations on how to develop learning materials.

Suggestions made by the participants on their experiences with the course team approach have revealed gaps in this practice in the ZOU. This finds resonance in Rowntree's (1994) comments on effective learning materials especially the need to observe set deadlines. Authorities like Allan (1996) and Boud (1988) agrees on the need for that subject expertise. Training in the course team must become the basis of the procedures for materials development in the ZOU.

Conclusions

The above discussion on the findings leads us to the following conclusions, that:

- Course team members need training
- There is an awareness of the course team approach
- Course team members do not observe given guidelines
- Some faculty members do not recognise the importance of quality assurance

Recommendation

The following recommendations were made:

1. Faculties, MDU should be the drivers of the course team
2. Quality assurance should be in cooperated into all the course team processes
3. Training in the course team and its process should be part of the procedures for materials development
4. There is need for periodic training of team players.
5. Team building should be encouraged.
6. Team players should adhere to stipulated deadlines.
7. Timelines for given tasks should be specified.
8. Coordination of activities should be paramount.
9. Team players in the development of instructional materials should have clear cut procedures that cover the development and production process of instructional materials.

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