

## **The Role of Literate Environment in the Provision of Effective Distance Learning**

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### ***Abstract***

*The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of literate environment in the provision of distance learning. Mixed methods research design was used because it helps the researcher to investigate the issue from diverse angles. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used as methods because they would compensate the weaknesses of each other. The primary sources of data were one co-coordinator of distance learning and two instructors from the School of Commerce, one distance and continuing education officer of AAU, three adult education instructors, five graduate students of Curriculum and Instruction, and ten regular graduate students of Adult and Lifelong Learning from the Department of Curriculum and Teachers Professional Development Studies (CTPDS) at Addis Ababa University, one adult and non-formal education expert from Addis Ababa Education Bureau, and one ANFE expert from the Ministry of Education. The secondary sources were relevant policy documents and manuals. The data obtained through the use of a questionnaire was analyzed by using percentage and mean whereas the qualitative information generated through the use of a semi-structured interview was transcribed, analyzed, interpreted and finally triangulated with the quantitative data obtained through a questionnaire. The data analysis led to the following major findings: the great majority of respondent students believed that a literate environment would enhance the provision of distance learning; instructors from the School of Commerce and the Department of Curriculum and Teachers Professional Development Studies believed that literate environment is necessary for the provision of adequate support services to distance learners; the ANFE experts from both AAEB and the MOE asserted that literate environment enhances post-literacy skills and would motivate neo-literates to continue their education through distance learning; literate environment enhances cultural literacy; improves the development of democratic values in a society and enhances citizens' social capital, awareness about cultural diversity and the importance of protecting their natural environment. Based on the major findings, it was safely concluded that literate environment plays a significant role in the development of distance learning. Finally, it was suggested that the MOE and regional education bureaus be advised to further enhance the development of literate environment in the country by more closely working with diverse stakeholders in general and the private sector, civil society organizations and publishing agencies in particular.*

**Key words:** Literate environment; Adult learning; Cultural literacy

## **I. Introduction**

### **1.1 Background of the Study**

Distance learning is a mode of delivering education and instruction, often on an individual basis, to students who are not physically present in a traditional setting such as a classroom. Distance learning provides "access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both." However, distance learning courses that require a physical presence for any reason (excluding taking examinations) are known as hybrid or blended courses of study.

Even though the development of distance education courses dates back to the early 18th century in Europe, distance education in the modern sense was the one that was delivered by Sir Isaac Pitman in the 1840s, who taught a system of shorthand by mailing texts transcribed into shorthand on postcards and receiving transcriptions from his students in return for correction. One of the major contributions of Pitman was the idea of providing feedback.

When it comes to the provision of distance learning in higher education institution, it was the University of London that offered distance learning degree to students in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The famous British author Charles Dickens referred to it as People's University, for it enrolled students from less affluent backgrounds.

In Ethiopia, distance education began initially in the form of correspondence education. In the last two decades, Alpha University College and St. Mary's University are private higher education institutions that have played a significant role in the provision of distance learning. Likewise, Jimma University and Bahir Dar University are among the most influential public universities in the delivery of distance education. Even though Addis Ababa University is a pioneering institution in the delivery of distance education, its role in the provision of distance learning in the last two decades could be seen as insignificant except the provision of distance learning by its School of Commerce.

### **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Literate environments play a decisive role in the development of distance learning. UNESCO (2011) has described the following as basic elements of literate environments: literacy materials and activities, physical environment, socio-cultural environment, political environment, assessment, and partnerships. However, it focused on issues of literacy. The issue of distance learning was studied by Mulugeta Kitaw ( ) and Getachew Adugna ( ). To the knowledge of the researcher, there is no study conducted on the role of literate environment in the provision of effective distance learning. Hence, this study would contribute to closing the existing research gap. To this end, the following research guiding questions were set:

- (1) What does the existence of literate environment for the effective provision of distance learning in AAU look like?
- (2) What are the most widely used media in the provision of distance learning in AAU?
- (3) What are the major challenges that distance learning has faced at AAU?

### **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

This study has both general and specific objectives.

#### **1.3.1 General Objective**

The overall objective of the study was to investigate the role of literate environment in the provision of distance learning at Addis Ababa University.

#### **1.3.2 Specific objectives**

The specific objectives of the study were to:

- Analyze the existence of literate environment conducive for effective distance learning;
- Identify the most widely used type of media in the provision of distance learning; and
- Detect the major challenges that distance learning has encountered in AAU.

### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

This study will have the following significance:

- It may help distance learning providing higher education institutions recognize the importance of literate environment for effective distance learning;
- It may help coordinators and tutors of distance learning identify ways of enhancing the development of literate environments;
- It may also help distance learners explore the existence of literate environments in the community they live; and
- It may initiate other researchers conduct further researches on the area

### **1.5 Scope of the Study**

It would have been more meaningful if the study had included respondents from diverse higher education institutions. However, due to time constraints, this study was delimited to Addis Ababa University for two reasons: One AAU is a pioneer institution in the provision of distance and continuing education program in the history of Ethiopian public higher education institutions; second, it still aspires to promote the development of distance learning. Furthermore, in terms of institution, it was delimited to School of Commerce which is still more active in the delivery of distance education programs compared to other colleges and schools of the University.

### **1.6 Definition of Key Terms**

- **Distance learning:** It is a mode of delivering education and instruction, often on an individual basis, to students who are not physically present in a traditional setting such as a classroom.
- **Literate environment:** It refers to the availability of such conducive environments for lifelong learning like schools, community learning centers, public libraries, ICT facilities, and so on.

## **II. Review of the Related Literature**

In this section of the study, the concept of literate environment, purpose and target groups of distance learning as well as the experiences of selected countries in the provision of distance learning were reviewed in light of the available wider literature and research outputs.

### **2.1 The Concept of Literate Environment**

Reading exercises the mind; develops critical thinking; boosts self-esteem; improves reflective writing and increases understanding and sensitivity (UNESCO 2011). This reality brings us to the issue of literate environments.

Literate environment is, among others, characterized by the very existence of literacy materials that are appropriate and relevant. In a literate environment, citizens are motivated to read and develop a reading culture. They believe that information is power because it helps them make informed decisions in their daily lives. People living in literate environment usually tend to develop a desire for improving their qualifications. One way to do so is through participation in distance learning.

### **2.2 The Purpose of Distance Learning**

The purpose of distance learning is to expand access to education and training for both general populace and businesses since its flexible scheduling structure lessens the effects of the many time-constraints imposed by personal responsibilities and commitments (Hasan, 2004).

## **2.3 Target Groups of Distance Learning**

There are diverse target groups of distance learning. This may include: workers, house wives, unemployed youth and adults, and marginalized sections of a society who are deprived of regular and formal learning opportunities. Today, a number of strategies are used by distance education providers to meet the needs of the target groups such as more frequent face-to-face tutorials and increased use of Information and Communication Technologies including teleconferencing and the Internet.

## **2.4 The Experience of Selected Countries in the Provision of Distance Learning**

### **2.4.1 The Experience of Bangladesh**

Bangladesh achieved its independence in 1971 and it employed mass education as a priority in the new nation. It launched the School Broadcasting Program (SBP) in 1978. Then, The project was later expanded to become the National Institute of Educational Media and Technology (NIEMT) in 1983. In 1985, the NIEMT was renamed the Bangladesh Institute of Distance Education (BIDE) which offered, apart from audio-visual materials, a Bachelor of Education program via distance learning validated by the University of Rajshahi. Based on success gained in the activities of the Bangladesh Institute of Distance Education, policy makers developed clear understanding about the need to establish Bangladesh Open University in the year 1992. According to Parves Sultan, as the only public university in Bangladesh to use distance education as a method of delivery,

BOU is mandated to "promote through multimedia; instruction of every standard and knowledge – both general and scientific – by means of any form of communications technology, to raise the standard of education and to give the people educational opportunities by democratizing education and creating a class of competent people by raising the standard of education of the people generally" (Sultan, 2012).

Today, Bangladesh Open University offers two types of programs, formal and non-formal education uses seven schools and a network of 12 regional resource centers and has 80 coordinating offices, and 1,000 tutorial centers nationwide. "A total of 21 formal academic programs are offered by BOU. Formal programs are academic programs that result in the awarding of an academic qualification up to master's degree completion and examination" (*Bangladesh Open University, 2014*).

The major challenge Bangladesh has faced in the delivery of distance education is the prevailing low literacy rate that led to low awareness of large section of the society about health, environment, disaster management, basic science, agriculture, food, nutrition and other branches of knowledge for human development. BOU is recognized as a national university by the

University Grants Commission of Bangladesh, a statutory body attached to the Ministry of Education.

#### **2.4.2 The Experience of Tanzania**

The Republic of Tanzania was formally found in 1964 out of the two states of Tanganyika and Zanzibar. In 2014, the population of Tanzania was estimated to be 50.8 million (The World Bank, 2014). In Tanzania, it is the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training which is responsible for providing education. Distance education is organized through a common association which is known as the “Distance Education Association of Tanzania”. This is also linked to the “Open and Distance Education Association of East Africa”.

The Open University of Tanzania was established in 1992 as a public university. Today, it has 25 Regional Centers and 69 Study Centers. Nevertheless, Distance Education in Tanzania has encountered a lot of problems. The major ones include lack of adequate funding hindered effective tutorial support to learners, lack of adequate infrastructures (roads, telecommunications and postal system and insufficient skills amongst personnel working in the administrative staff of distance education.

### **III. Research Design and Methodology**

Mixed methods research design was employed because it helps the researcher to generate the required information from diverse sources by using various data gathering tools (Creswell, 2003). Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used because they would compensate the weaknesses of each other (Best and Kahn (1989). The primary sources of data were one co-coordinator of ;distance learning and two instructors from the School of Commerce, three adult education instructors, five graduate students of Curriculum and Instruction, and ten regular graduate students of Adult and Lifelong Learning from the Department of Curriculum and Teachers Professional Development Studies (CTPDS) at Addis Ababa University, one distance and continuing education officer of Addis Ababa University, one adult and non-formal education expert from Addis Ababa Education Bureau, and one ANFE expert from the Ministry of Education. The secondary sources were relevant policy documents and manuals. The data obtained through the use of a questionnaire was analyzed by using percentage whereas the qualitative information generated through the use of a semi-structured interview was transcribed, analyzed, interpreted and finally triangulated with the quantitative data obtained through a questionnaire.

### **IV. Data Analysis and Discussions**

#### **4.1. Background Characteristics of Respondents**

**Table 1: Respondent Students by Sex, Age and Qualification**

	Students	ANFE expert from the MoE	ANFE expert from AAEB	Coordinator of DE from School of Commerce	Officer from DCE programs of AAU	Instructors from AAU
<b>Sex</b>						
M	14	1	1	1	1	5
F	1	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Age</b>						
25 – 35	4	-	-	-	-	-
36-40	8	1	1	1	-	2
41-45	2	-	-	-	-	3
46-50	1	-	-	-	-	-
51-55	-	-	-	-	1	-
<b>Qualification</b>						
B.A./B.Ed/B.Sc	15	-	-	-	-	-
M.A./M.Sc.	-	1	1	1	-	2
PhD	-	-	-	-	1	3

Table 1 above indicates that 23 (95.8%) of the respondents are males whereas only 1 (4.2%) is female. Concerning their ages, 4 (16.6%), 13 (54.1%), 5 (20.8%) , 1 (4.2%) and 1 (4.2%) respondents were between the age range of 25-35, 36-40, 41-45, 46-50 and 51-55 respectively.

In terms of qualification, 15 (62.5%), 5 (20.8%) and 4 (16.6% ) of the respondents had bachelor of arts , masters of arts and PhD degree respectively

#### **4.2. The Existence of Literate Environment (Educational Institutions, Public Libraries, ICT Facilities, Newspapers, etc)**

**Table 2: Respondent Students’ Views Concerning the Availability of Literate Environment**

No.	Item	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1.	There is adequate literate environment for effective distance learning in Ethiopia.	2	2	-	8	3
2.	There is equitable distribution of literate environment across the country.	3	2	-	3	7
3.	AAU has adequate capacity to deliver distance learning.	5	7	-	2	1

In Item 1 of table 2 above, respondent students were asked to indicate their levels of agreement concerning the adequacy of literate environment for distance learning in Ethiopia. Accordingly, 4 (26.6%) and 11 (73.3%) of the respondents reported their agreement and disagreement respectively.

In item 2 of the same table, respondents were asked to indicate their levels of agreement concerning the existence of equitably distributed literate environment in Ethiopia. Accordingly, 5 (33.3%) and 10(66.6%) of the respondents expressed their agreement and disagreement respectively.

Finally, in item 3 of the same table, they were requested to indicate their levels of agreement with regard to the capacity of AAU to deliver distance learning. Accordingly, 12 (80%) and 3 (20%) of the respondent students expressed their agreement and disagreement respectively.

With regard to this issue, the researcher asked an officer of Distance and Continuing Education Programs of Addis Ababa University who reported:

Addis Ababa University has actually rich experience in the delivery of distance learning. In the last two decades, however, the provision of distance learning has been mainly accomplished by the School of Commerce of the College of Business and Economics. In the last three years, attempt has been made to revitalize the provision of distance learning at AAU. To this end, Strategic Plan and Operation Manual documents have been produced and they would be endorsed soon by the University Management. Currently, in addition to the distance programs run by the School of Commerce, the following institutions of the University have started the provision of graduate distance learning programs: Public Administration and Development Management (FBE, Health and Social Psychology (School of Psychology) Educational Planning and Management (CEBS) and Social Work (CSS. Moreover, AAU is trying to work closely with Higher Education



Relevance and Quality Assurance Agency (HERQA) in order to maintain the quality of the distance programs. Generally, Addis Ababa University has a great potential to design and run distance learning programs particularly in graduate studies (April 24, 2015).

#### 4.3. The Most Widely Used Media in Distance Learning in Ethiopia

**Table 3: Respondent Students' Views Concerning the Type of Most Widely Used Media in Distance Learning in Ethiopia**

No.	Item	Students (N=15)	Percentage
1.	The most widely used media in distance learning		
	(a) Audio-media	3	20
	(b) Print media	8	53.4
	(c) Audio-visual media	4	26.6

Table 3 above deals with the identification of the most frequently used media in the delivery of distance learning in Ethiopia. Accordingly, 8 (53.4%) of the respondents asserted that print media are the most frequently used type of media. On the other hand, audio-visual and visual media were believed to be the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> most frequently used media in the delivery of distance learning in the country.

Concerning this, the researcher conducted an interview with one of the instructors (Instructor-1) who teaches the course "Distance and e-Learning" in the masters program of Adult and Lifelong Learning at the College of Education who said:

Generally, in developing countries like Ethiopia, print media are the most widely used media in the delivery of distance learning. Of course, there is observable and growing improvement in the utilization of ICT, for instance, the Internet and e-mails for the purpose of distance learning (April 15, 2015).

Even though it is generally agreed that print media are the most widely used media in distance learning programs of developing nations, the experience of the School of Commerce of Addis Ababa University is a bit different and worth mentioning hereunder. The Officer from Distance and Continuing Education Programs of the School of Commerce asserted:

The School of Commerce had rich experience in the delivery of distance learning programs. Initially, it started with certificate level and then after a year it began a diploma program. Then, two years later, it started the delivery of MBA program in collaboration with the British Open University which, however, ceased a year ago. Now, the School of

Commerce is running distance learning programs in the following graduate programs: Marketing, Logistics and Supply Management, Project Management, and Human Resource management. The School of Commerce has modules for all the courses and they are availed to the students via their e-mails. Meaning, students obtain soft copies of the modules. There are SMART classes for the delivery of tutorial services” (April 25, 2015).

#### 4.4. Functions of Literate Environment

**Table 4: Respondent Students’ Views Concerning the Functions of Literate Environment**

s.n.	Item	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
		F	F	F	F	F
1.	Literate environment enhances cultural literacy.	9	2	-	3	1
2.	Literate environment promotes the development of democratic political culture.	11	2	-	1	1
3.	Literate environment motivates citizens to participate in distance learning programs	8	6	-	-	1
4.	Literate environment promotes post-literacy skills	13	2			

Table 4 above deals with functions of literate environment. In item 1 of table 4, respondent students were asked to express their levels of agreement concerning the claim that literate environment enhances cultural literacy. Accordingly, 11 (73.3%) of the respondents expressed their agreement whereas only 4 (26.6%) disagreed on the issue.

In item 2 of the same table, they were asked to indicate their level of agreement with regard to the idea that literate environment promotes the development of democratic political culture. Accordingly, 13 (86.6%) and 2 (13.3%) of the respondents indicated their agreement and disagreement respectively.

In item 3 of the same table, they were requested to express their levels of agreement on the issue that literate environment motivates citizens to participate in distance learning programs.

Accordingly, 14 (93.3%) of the respondents replied as ‘agreed’ whereas only 1 (6.6%) indicated their disagreement.

Finally, respondent students were asked to express their levels of agreement on the issue that literate environment promotes post-literacy skills. Accordingly, all (100%) of them believed that literate environment fosters the development of post-literacy skills.

#### 4.5. Benefits of Distance Learning

**Table 5: Respondent Students’ Views Concerning the Benefits of Distance Learning**

s.n.	Item	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
		F	f	f	f	F
1.	Distance learning can be delivered from a single point to multiple sites through the use of modern technologies.	11	1	-	2	1
2.	Distance learning gives students options to participate whenever they wish.	8	5	-	-	2
3.	Distance learning provides a variety of materials than can meet the learners’ needs.	7	7	-	1	-
4.	Distance learning courses can offer increased interactions with the students via technologies.	3	5	-	7	-

The items in Table 5 above deal with benefits of distance learning. In item 1 of table 5, respondents were requested to indicate their levels of agreement concerning the idea that distance learning can be delivered from a single point to multiple sites through the use of modern technologies. Accordingly, 12 (80%) of the respondents expressed their agreement whereas only 3 (20%) of them disagreed about it.

In item 2 of table 5, they were asked to indicate their levels of agreement on the issue that distance learning provides students with an option to participate whenever they wish. Accordingly, 13 (86.6%) of them agreed whereas only 2 (13.3%) of the respondents disagreed.

In item 3 of the same table, respondent students were asked to indicate their levels of agreement concerning the idea that distance learning provides a variety of materials than can meet the learners' needs. Accordingly, 14 (93.3%) of them expressed their agreement whereas only 1 (6.6%) of them disagreed. This goes in line with Tummons' idea of differentiation that the individualities of students should be taken into account in learning and teaching (Tummons, 2010:93).

Finally, they were requested to express their levels of agreement with regard to the issue that distance learning courses can offer increased interactions with the students via technologies. Accordingly, a slight majority 8 (53.3%) of the respondents agreed whereas a significant number 7 (46.6%) of them expressed their disagreement.

From these, it could be inferred that the majority of respondent students believed that distance learning can be delivered from a single point to multiple sites, and that it can promote flexible participation and provide diverse materials that could address students' needs.

## **V. Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **5.1. Summary of the Major Findings**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of literate environment in the provision of distance learning. To this end, descriptive survey design was used and data was gathered by using both quantitative and qualitative methods. A total of 24 respondents were used as sources of data. Data collection instruments were questionnaire and semi-structured interview guide. The data obtained through the use of a questionnaire was analyzed by using percentage whereas the qualitative information generated through the use of a semi-structured interview was transcribed, analyzed, interpreted and finally triangulated with the quantitative data obtained through a questionnaire.

The data analysis led to the following major findings:

- The study disclosed that the majority of respondent students (73.3%) believed that there is no adequate literate environment for distance learning in Ethiopia.
- It was found out that there wasn't equitable distribution of literate environment in Ethiopia.
- The study revealed that a great majority (80%) of the respondents believed that Addis Ababa University has adequate capacity to deliver distance learning.
- It was found out that the most frequently utilized media in distance learning in Ethiopia were print media.

- The study indicated that the majority (73.3%) of the respondent students believed that literate environment enhances cultural literacy.
- It was disclosed that the majority of the respondents (86.6%) believed that literate environment promotes the development of democratic political culture.
- It was also found out that the great majority of the respondent students (93.3%) believed that literate environment motivates citizens to participate in distance learning programs.
- The study showed that all (100%) of the respondents asserted that literate environment promotes post-literacy skills.
- It was found out that the majority (80%) of respondent students believed that distance learning can be delivered from a single point to multiple sites through the use of modern technologies.
- The study indicated that the great majority of the respondent students (93.3%) believed that distance learning provides a variety of materials than can meet the learners' needs.

## **5.2. Conclusion**

Based on the major findings, it was safely concluded that despite the growing provision of distance learning in Ethiopia today, the absence of adequate literate environment has remained a challenge to effective delivery of distance learning in the country.

## **5.3. Recommendations**

Based on the major findings and the conclusions drawn, the following recommendations were made:

- The Ethiopian Ministry of Education should closely work with other stakeholders to expand literate environments across the country.
- Institutions running distance education programs ought to work closely with governmental and non-governmental organizations as well as with the private sector and the general public to raise the awareness of the people about distance education.
- Woreda education offices/sub-cities should work in the area of establishing and expanding public libraries for the community so as to enhance the reading culture of the society.
- Private and public universities should share their experiences concerning the implementation and management of distance learning.
- National Symposium on Distance Learning should be organized by Ethiopian distance educators' association so as to create a platform for dialogue and experience sharing.

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