Orientation narratives and discourses in Open and Distance Learning: A case for the Zimbabwe Open University Masvingo Regional Campus

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Abstract

This article focuses on the narratives of Open and Distance learners as they talk about their reasons for studying with the Zimbabwe Open University and how this fits with their working life. The study was qualitative and used the case study design. Narratives were used to gather data from students who had come for orientation. Students managed to highlight reasons why they want to study with ZOU. The study concludes that narratives are relevant during orientation of new students. Orientation programmes that give students opportunity to give narratives enhance student retention. The study also concludes that narratives influence student motivation to complete programmes they start. The findings demonstrate the importance of selecting orientation techniques based on capturing experiences from students that give them focus to complete their programmes.

Key words: orientation, narratives, discourses, Open and Distance Learning, Regional Campus

Introduction

Orientation of new students in universities is the foundation that determines the future success and student retention rate (Robinson, Burns&Gaw, 1996). It is the bedrock that sets directions for new students and that shapes their thinking and becomes the reference point for student learning and success. It is of importance in order to fill in the mind gap for higher education knowledge faculties. Orientation programmes expose to students the philosophy of excellence (Astin, 1991) the university has, the issues to do with identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) and thus providing motivation to students to pursue with their studies with positive attitudes. University staff should be awakened in order to see its benefits and make students ready to meet both academic and social challenges of the higher education landscape with energy.

Orientation of new students is a momenta’s event for all who attend. Orientation is one way of leading students into the highway to improvement in student learning. Students are removed from darkness and led along a continuum from disengagement to engagement (Bryson & Hand, 2007). Giving narratives during
orientation is in line with Astin (1985)'s theory of student involvement. The theory is based on the concept that the more students are committed to their educational experience, both psychologically and physically, the more they will succeed in and be satisfied with their college experience. Although orientation of new students is a traditional semester event, for the first semester of 2015, the Masvingo regional campus approached the event with a difference. Students were made to give narratives of what brings them to the Zimbabwe Open University. This was an interesting moment to both new students and the tutors. ZOU proves to be the real mode of obtaining university education to the majority of people. The new students demonstrated its usefulness to society in their stories. This event was characterised by inspired students who promise to work hard throughout their studies. The argument for involving students fully during orientation is loud and clear. The more students participate and become involved in university activities like orientation, the more likely they are to persist with their studies (Tinto, 1998).

Orientation programmes are a tool which universities use to familiarize new students with the social and academic life of the university. Some universities employ orientation as a tool to market their programmes (Galloway, 2000) and ensure student transition by providing an opportunity for incoming students to meet and create relationships with other incoming students, faculty, and staff (Robinson, Burns, &Gaw, 1996). Devlin (1996) reported that orientation programmes that take place in the natural environment, with full involvement of the participants, helps students to feel challenged to pursue their programmes. It is believed that students change by becoming involved through investing both psychological and physical energy into tasks, people, and/or activities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For the reason that students become immensely involved in the presentation of narratives, orientation programmes often compel students to be engaged psychologically and this triggers commitment into university work.

Research has shown that students who participate in an orientation session achieve greater levels of academic success at university. Orientation also provides new students with the opportunity to make friends quickly and meet potential study partners. Orientation sessions that provide students the opportunity to share their social experiences create relationships and friendships that may last throughout their college careers (First Year Programs, 2010). In the same vein it is argued that the academic culture in most institutions does not encourage conversations about paying attention to the inner self of students and what matters most. But rather than dwell on why we do not have these conversations, we can try to figure out how to encourage them (Astin and Schreder, 2003, p. 16). Most universities have dearth of information as regards narratives by students during orientation. This research therefore fills the void.

Open and Distance Learning is flexible to most people who are at work because they want to learn while they earn. The Zimbabwe Open University is the only university with the mandate to offer university education through ODL in Zimbabwe. The concept of learning anywhere and anytime makes it more flexible to students. Flexibility is a dominant discourse in today’s society (Edwards, 1997) and a growing ‘time trend’ in relation to work (Adam, 1995, p.103).

Statement of the problem

Several universities carry out orientation programmes with students giving them their demands. Students are not given an opportunity to say their personal narratives on why they have come to join the university. Narratives form a strong component on the relationship between the student and the faculty, the staff and the university itself. Student experiences help staff to see how to
handle the students and the sort of expectations they have from the university. Surprisingly, this is not given full attention by most universities during their orientation sessions. This study fills the void.

Research questions

1. How effective are narratives during orientation of new students?
2. In which way does orientation enhance student retention?
3. To what extent do narratives influence student motivation to complete programmes they start?

Theoretical framework:
The leadership competence theory

The leadership competency theory in higher education contains four categories of competencies which are context, content, process and communication (McDaniel, 2002). The present study used the process competence category which hinge on the leader’s knowledge and understanding of leadership in general and the behaviours and processes necessary to achieve successful outcomes. Effective leaders make decisions consistent with the mission and goals of the institution, engaging in inclusive, collaborative, and team-oriented behaviour (Ferren & Stanton, 2004; Filan & Seagren, 2003). They learn through self-reflection (Filan & Seagren, 2003), through experience, and from others (Hoppe, 2003; Padilla, 2005). They continually refine their knowledge and accept new information to guide decisions. Leaders who display process competencies are flexible, are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and consider multiple resources of information when necessary. Such leaders understand and attend to the needs of contemporary students. This theory was relevant to the current study since it points to an innovation that was taken by leadership during the process of orientation to let students give their narratives.

Methodology

Importantly, a narrative approach highlights the subjective nature of research, the storied nature of ‘reality’, and the multiplicity of individual meanings and ‘lived realities’ (Raddon, 2007; Chamberlayne, Bornat & Wengraf, 2000). Coffey and Atkinson (1996, p. 76) highlight that people tell stories in all areas of their lives, providing a means of sharing ‘meanings and personal experiences’. ZOU students had stories to tell that made them choose the university as their best way to attain higher education qualifications.

Conceptual framework of the orientation

- Orientation programmes
  - Student services and management
  - Library and ICT services
  - Study skills in Open and Distance Learning
  - Departmental programme specific orientation
Narratives from new students

Students were asked to give motivating presentations on studying with ZOU. Voluntarily, new students shared with the whole group experiences that motivated them to join the Zimbabwe Open University. They had the following to say:

**Student A**

ZOU has heart for students. Students are effectively taught with broad coverage of content without teaching for examinations. There is proper learning and there is high level of professionalism. I was once a student but I dropped because of other commitments. Now I have come back to do a Masters degree in Educational Management. I am woman and our chance has come since strings in the conventional system marginalized us. My husband is a retired school head and our family enjoyed the fruits of ZOU. My husband is a product of this university and the whole family has been inspired. We have always enjoyed the benefits of studying through ZOU in our family.

Clarke (2003) is of the view that in exploring the discourses and links between women’s caring role and engagement in education, family responsibilities are often treated as ‘an obstacle to learning, rather than as a source of knowledge’ or of equal value to paid work. ZOU suits women conditions of learning while still belonging to their families and carrying out their normal responsibilities.

**Student B**

I grew up in Masvingo city but we never had an opportunity to be exposed to university education. I just had a challenge and also the fact that I lead a congregation, I want to show my congregation that we can also do it. Education is the backbone of everything in life. My task is to demonstrate to the church that education is important. I have been given the task of leading the congregation and it is not the church skills that are needed but leadership skills. So to me, ZOU is the answer since it meets my situation. I can work while I study.

The focus of this narrative seems to hinge on motivations at the individual level. Issues to do with leadership capability of organisations, personal experience and growth, economic benefits, among others, push learners to fit into the mode of study of the Zimbabwe Open University.

**Student C**

I am one of those fortunate people. I once worked at Gaths Mine. In 2000 I was invited by the Regional Director of the Zimbabwe Open University at Chevron for orientation. On that occasion, I was inspired by one Professor who said “If you do not hold a degree, you do not, that is it”. So I did my first degree BAMS with ZOU. This degree made me great in many ways. I once worked for ZBC. At ZBC I worked with people who were not as educated as I was, therefore I failed to develop myself but that was not the end. I left ZBC for Bindura Nickel Mine. ZOU first degree enhanced me to greater heights. If a mere degree enhanced such a success, what about if I increase my profile. No matter how good your job, if you do not have a degree, you have something lacking. I was inspired when I went to the graduation ceremony. Now I have come to pursue the Masters degree in Peace, Leadership and Conflict Resolution.

The narrative points to the need for flexible employment, which is not only a reflection of the current requirements of the labour market, but also as a means for individuals to avoid work-related stress. This mirrors popular discourses of flexibility as enabling employers to remain competitive while employees maintain a work–life balance (Adam, 1995).

**Student D**

Display of qualifications at the college inspired me. I was inspired by the price giving in Gweru. An academic procession was carried out. I was made in charge of the choir while academics were told to join the academic procession. This challenged me. Since 2001, I was waiting for this opportunity to develop myself. ‘Because in our church, we give each other chances to study. Now my chance has come and I feel very proud to study with ZOU. My brother here at ZOU is the one I am following behind. I am inspired because of him. ZOU is my first choice university.

**Student E**

I have come to become part of the ZOU family. After A-level I joined ZOU and started doing BAECs. Before I completed the degree, I joined Mutare...
teachers' college and trained as a teacher. One thing to note was that I did not stop reading even if I was at college. I continued with my studies through ZOU. I obtained BAECS degree. Very young as I was, I took courage to continue. I have come to do MBA with ZOU again. I was offered a place for work at Mutare Polytechnic because of BAECS. With ZOU, you reach greater heights. ZOU degrees are very powerful. Get it from me the beneficiary of the programmes. I encourage all those who are thirsty for university education to join ZOU. You can only say the degree is not useful because you did not go through that milieu. It is a rigorous process with standard examinations. Contestations are only made by people who are not open-minded.

**Student F**

Differences in salaries at first payment caused me to apply for a place at university. My inspiration is my husband. He earned his degrees through ZOU and now he is working in South Africa. He has a good job and he is also doing PhD through distance education. ZOU has made our family great. I have come for a Masters degree in Educational Management because it is very relevant for me. I am working as a staff development consultant. I help teachers in South Africa to learn to teach. I feel I need to study at home because of the weight of ZOU education.

**Student G**

As a student nurse, I was taught by ZOU tutors. ZOU is relevant for workers and uplifts people at their work places. Promotions do not depend on age but on qualifications. I have come for the BSC Nursing Science degree. It is really relevant and useful worldwide.

**Student H**

I started off as a building assistant at WALLEN Construction fourteen (14) years ago. I never went to formal school. I actually did O-level through correspondence. Thereafter, I started my own company. With only O-level I was challenged to meet the demands of the company intellectually. When we meet with other business people, my business card does not carry wait. O-level is not enough. I was inspired by my Pastor at church who graduated with ZOU. More importantly, I want to improve myself so that I meet the demands of employment opportunities. To me ZOU is the in-

thing. I have seen the power of these degrees in the various meetings that we hold with other business people. You actually see that without a degree, you cannot compete. I am not afraid to join the ZOU family.

Davey (2003) carried out a research on redundancy, discontinuity of employment and adults' return to education. The study was a survey research and it found that redundancy was a motivator to return to education for 18 per cent of older men and 12 per cent of older women students aged 40+ surveyed at Victoria University, New Zealand. Davey's subsequent interviews highlighted that the majority felt that gaining a qualification was very important, both in terms of status and validation in the face of ageism in the labour market. ZOU provides the opportunity to many who want to improve their status quo regardless of age.

**Student I**

I have come here to pursue a Masters degree in Business Administration. Initially I trained as a teacher and taught at primary school level. I was inspired by other teachers who hold degrees in the school. I joined ZOU and pursued a degree in Psychology. When I came for weekend schools, the ages of people whom I saw at the university inspired me. I hold an honours' degree in Psychology which I obtained through ZOU. Soon after graduation, I was offered a job in a Sugar Milling Company. This is only possible because of the knowledge I gained through ZOU. I do not hesitate to tell you that my bosses are pleased by my performance at work. They have promised to pay fees for me if I perform well in this first semester.

**Student J**

I have been working for the past 26 years as an accountant without being promoted. All juniors have come and enjoyed different ranks in terms of promotion. It is important just to be called a graduate. I have seen many people from ZOU who would come to our company. They are now my bosses regardless of the experience at work.

The discourse shows that students have trust in Open and Distance Learning as an equally competent way of attaining higher education. They seem to point to the idea of being confident in one self to go through the
degree. While they are not saying it loud and clear that distance education removes the dependence syndrome, students seem to point to the need for self discipline as a necessary tool for distance learners.

Student K

After training as teacher, I got married. People told me that only one thing was now missing, that is a degree. The former head of a primary school in Masvingo inspired me. He obtained a degree through ZOU. I felt challenged by his words of a real man. I started my journey with ZOU doing BSC Physical Education and Sport. I did and finished BSC PES. Special Honours PES was introduced and I finished last year and graduated. Now I have come for a Masters degree. These degrees are useful to me because now I am a lecturer at a teachers college.

Student L

The idea of learning while you earn has touched me. I cannot leave my family and my work at yet there is a university with a noble facility, learning while you earn.

Today, students show that they cannot wait for one thing, that of being a student only. They are raising awareness to higher education providers to ensure that programmes offered should accommodate students through distance education. Students are part of the family and society at large and some are elderly that they cannot leave family commitments to chance. They want to learn while they earn. Raddon (2007) argues that distance learners noted that engaging in continued learning becomes one means of coping with this timescape, by becoming more flexible and remaining employable.

Student M

These days, unqualified teachers are employed on contract basis. Gone are the days when possession of a degree without a professional qualification was not a cause for concern by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. At the moment if you do not have a professional qualification it means you are on contract and any time is tea time for you to leave the job. I have therefore decided to join ZOU in order to get a professional qualification of Post Graduate Diploma in Education. This qualification would make me secure my job. The programme demands that one should be at a school for teaching practice and this suits my situation very well. Public Service is threatening and all untrained teachers are subjected to the threat of replacement.

The discourses of flexibility and insecurity seem to be emerging from this narrative. Sudden changes in terms of work qualifications cause people to think to take up higher qualifications through ZOU. This has impacted on the individuals’ decision to study with ZOU, alongside their multiple roles and responsibilities.

References


