BOOK REVIEW

Guidelines on Open and Distance Learning for Youth and Adult Literacy

UNESCO INSTITUTE FOR LIFELONG LEARNING AND THE COMMONWEALTH OF LEARNING

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Guidelines on open and distance learning for youth and adult literacy, by the UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning and the Commonwealth of Learning, sets the scene with noteworthy messages from the Director, UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning (UIL), and the President and CEO from the Commonwealth of Learning (COL).

The publication highlights the progression of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) for youth and adult learners as an alternative to traditional education delivery, reinforcing the importance of change, and updating and reimagining existing practices taking cognisance of the context and needs of youth and adult learners, especially after the significant disruptions of COVID-19 on the education system. It further elaborates on the existing literature regarding adult literacy programmes and educational provision employing ODL, but asserts that "no specific guidelines for planning, designing, developing, implementing and evaluating youth and adult literacy programmes using ODL have been published to date" (p. 2). It is estimated that 773 million youth and adults, the majority being women, lack literacy skills, which are fundamental for growth. The recommendations contained within these guidelines are critical for institutions and literacy training providers, focus on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through socio-economic transformation and ensure the right to education. The aim of this book in the form of guidelines is to "offer an introduction to and guidance on the design of ODL programmes for youth and adults who lack basic literacy and numeracy skills" (p. 3), featuring issues that youth and adult learners face. The book is organised into, two key parts: Part 1 focuses on the four key steps for planning and implementing ODL programmes for youth and adult literacy, and Part 2 focuses on media and technologies for literacy.

In Part 1 the authors make the assertion that planning requires investment in time and resources and recommend four key steps.

Step 1: Planning and Designing

The first guideline relates to ensuring that programmes are developed on a needs basis with considerations being made on what is available and what still needs to be introduced and for which target audience. The authors highlight that planning should be in line with national policies and strategies, to ensure effective transition.

They recommend identifying the needs of the learners, their particular demographic factors, design requirements, and considering Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, cultural and social

relevance of learning materials, and language for both facilitators and learners. They suggest that curriculum mapping plays a significant role in ensuring programmes relate and are aligned to communities and the way of life of the learners. Other considerations that they stress include accessibility and delivery mode, learner support structures, identification of appropriate assessment strategies and selection of appropriate technologies, dedicated facilitator training and support, administrative and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) support, Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems, intense financial planning, involvement of various partners and establishment of long-lasting partnerships. That the authors recommend these steps from the onset is creditable as so often programmes are launched without consideration of these elements.

Step 2: Development of Instructional and Learning Materials

Step 2 reiterates the importance of instructional and learning materials in ODL programmes and underlines the transfer of knowledge, and accessibility of learning materials through various media and self-learning. The publication presents aspects of material development in detail, such as the principles used for youth and adult literacy ODL programmes and content development that ensures self-learning. Included in this step is an analysis of the characteristics of distance learning materials, structure and quality, diversification of media usage, models and approaches for course development; equity and inclusion, costing and human resource considerations in ODL course material development and the use and role of Open Educational Resources (OER) in materials development. Also included are suggestions for assessment, instruments and tools with particular reference to "what a learner is required to do, how they must do it, when they need to do it and how long it should take" (p. 42).

The authors caution that mistakes in materials development for ODL programmes are costly to rectify and if materials are not standardised, people will not enroll as estimated, which then defeats the purpose of the programme.

Step 3: Implementing and Managing ODL Literacy Programmes

This step focuses on effective recruitment and training processes, learner enrolment and support, finances and administrative tasks, and implementation of quality assurance strategies for ODL programmes in youth and adult literacy. Financial investment in ODL administrative systems is costly as they are scaled and implemented at a distance. The book suggests facilitators need to develop different skills required for effective teaching, such as attitudes/feelings that enable them to be open to learning and grasping new concepts and knowledge/awareness that enables them to detect any changes in circumstances, especially for adult learners, and implementing the appropriate distance education practices.

This step is well presented, however, more information on how learners actually register for such programmes, the requirements for documentation (including facilitators) and the general numbers each facility should have as a maximum per session to ensure that learners get the most out of the ODL programme would have been helpful.

Step 4: Monitoring and Evaluation of ODL Literacy Programmes

In Step 4, importance is placed on Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) of ODL youth and adult literacy programmes. Emphasis is on continuous monitoring and evaluation of methods, approaches, resources and technologies used during the design and implementation of an ODL programme, to

ensure they yield the required results. This may lead to programme upgrades and consideration of new and more effective designs. The authors also refer to the direct correlation of the M&E planning referred to in Step 1 and the actual M&E implementation in this step.

The book highlights guidelines and frameworks that help establish learner analytics. This step also discusses the importance of data collection, data management and reporting systems — data analysis that could aid in informed decision-making and most importantly the implementation of feedback that could inform improvements.

Elements of data collection identified are feedback from facilitators, designers and learners; assessment of outcomes of content knowledge, technology needs and access; learner engagement with content; internal and external process efficiency and enrolment information together with completion rates.

This step ends with a checklist for ODL programmes for youth and adult literacy, regarding planning, implementation and monitoring that is invaluable for all implementers.

In Part 2: Media and Technologies for Literacy, the authors zoom in on "the various technologies that can support the delivery of such programmes" (p. 62)

They believe that any ODL programme in youth and adult literacy must recognise and embrace the use of media but emphasis should be on relevance for different learner types. The authors also caution that "technology choices should be assessed in terms of function, delivery channels, reach, access to devices, software, interface requirements (including accessibility), type of content, support requirements and affordability" (p. 62). This is a critical point as it is relevant to the context of less-developed countries where the majority of the populations still reside in rural areas, where they cannot afford digital devices but connectivity issues also reign supreme. The authors then discuss a variety of technologies and how they can be used to advance ODL programme delivery.

Print Media

Print media includes resources such as textbooks, study guides and instructional materials. The authors recognise that print media remain very popular even in the face of new technologies due to their "ease of access and use" (p. 62).

Radio

Radio is one of the most accessible media forms be it analogue or digital. The book highlights the ability of radio to facilitate learning in local languages and repeating programmes, both of which help provide an almost flexible learning mode. Although learning in groups with facilitators, as well as the integration of Interactive Radio Instruction (IRI) participatory exercises, may be an attractive initiative, it is important to consider the stability of radio frequencies as well as the effectiveness of facilitators delivering the learning process through radio.

Television

The authors argue that programmes delivered via television can be interactive and offer an engaging option that enables group work and monitoring of activities. This is useful, however, the book does not explicitly explain how television would enable ODL on a channel basis. Questions one might ask are: How would it be implemented? On what channels? Are they available on local signals in all

areas? Besides television, are other accessories like digital decoders required? Answers to these can give stakeholders an idea of how to enable ODL through the use of television as a learning tool.

Digital Technologies

The book underscores the importance of interactivity in content, especially through the use of various social media platforms. It is clear that the use of digital platforms is growing, especially as a result of the pandemic. However, it is important to be cautious when measuring success insofar as these technologies have not yet been widely used in a full system that is heavily dependent on them. Pros and cons are referenced by the authors in this regard.

The publication highlights various digital technology considerations, such as mobile learning, virtual classrooms, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and various online tools and platforms such as social media and Artificial Intelligence (AI). The authors particularly highlight the high usage of mobile phones in a developing country context and its potential for literacy programmes but also caution about certain constraints in this regard.

Worth considering is the fact that, although virtual learning and AI provide advanced levels of learning, they are still far from being considered fully effective tools for ODL, especially on the basis of accessibility and the high costs they require to implement on a wide range/scale.

Conclusion

Overall, this book offered a holistic view and approach for the implementation of an ODL programme in youth and adult literacy in an in-depth manner, and the authors should be commended for the rich literature analysis and incorporation of worldwide case studies and highly relevant examples throughout their publication. It is a well-articulated publication, showing promising results, especially for the development and implementation of ODL programmes with specific relevance to youth and adult literacy, as the world pivots from traditional learning practices.

This book could aid institutions or individuals considering the implementation of ODL programmes right from planning and implementation to active monitoring and evaluation. The authors offer practical guidance, balancing advice on what to do with what not to do. The authors balance between availing guidance and what could work and possible unavoidable challenges. Acknowledging the richness of this publication goes without saying, however, deeper insight into funding would have strengthened it, especially in relation to establishing estimates, cost breakdown analysis and information on how funds are distributed and kept and used in the various communities. As more ODL systems are rolled out an updated edition could draw on empirical data, results and their success to further support the guidelines. The authors should also be commended for acknowledging the scope limitations of their publication throughout the respective parts and drawing the reader's attention to additional research or reading.

Reviewed by:

Dr. Catherine Margaret Beukes-Amiss, the Director of the Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching (CILT) at the University of Namibia (UNAM) where she practices the implementation of ODeL activities and strategies. She is passionate about the enhancement and infusion of technology in Learning and Teaching in a Higher Education context. Email: cmbeukes@unam.na