



Using Mobile Phones as a Complementary Tool for Counseling Practicum Supervision in ODL: The Zimbabwe Open University- Harare/ Chitungwiza Region

¹Chaminuka L., ^{*2}Dr. Kaputa T.M.

¹Regional Programme Coordinator Counselling, ²Chairperson Department of Disability Studies and Special Needs Education. Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, Zimbabwe Open University.

¹Email: lilianc915 @gmail.com

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***Corresponding Author**

Kaputa T.M.

E-mail: tmusankuleni @gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study looks at how mobile phones are used to supervise counselling practicum in the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) in Harare- Chitungwiza Region. ZOU is an open and distance learning (ODL) institution which offers degree programmes in various disciplines including counseling. Holmberge (1977) points out that ODL or distance education (DE) covers the various forms of study at all levels but are not supervised in lecture rooms or in the same premises but are planned, guided and taught by an institution at a distance. The supervision of practical degree programmes in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is already a challenge. The use of emerging technologies like mobile phones as an additional mode of supervision into open and distance learning can bring novelty into this area. This case study focused on a counselling student who was attached to a local hospital. Data was collected through the student's personal accounts and interviews. Triangulation was achieved through interviews with supervisor at both the local hospital and the university. Findings show that the mobile phone is essential as an additional tool for supervising practicum during the actual intervention wherever anywhere. The study recommends that mobile phones be used to complement the supervision of practicums.

Keywords:

Mobile phones, counseling, practicum, supervision, emerging technologies

INTRODUCTION

This study focused on how mobile phones were used to complement the supervision of the counseling practicum in the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) in Harare/Chitungwiza Region. ZOU is an open and distance learning (ODL) institution which offers degree programmes in various disciplines including counseling. Distance educators agree that distance education includes both distance learning and teaching (Keegan 1990). Holmberge (1977) goes further and points that DE covers the various forms of study at all levels but are not supervised in lecture rooms or in the same premises but are planned, guided and taught by an institution. Practicum is an attachment Bachelor of Science counselling that students undergo at a counselling institution to complete their training. It enables the student turn the theory they have learnt into practice. In Open and Distance Learning, this tends to have challenges due to the distance between the supervisor or coordinator and the trainee. The use of emerging technologies like mobile phones as an additional mode of supervision can bring novelty into this area. Mobile phones according to Webopedia (2013) are defined as hand held devices which use radio waves transmitted from an antenna to send and receive audio and visual information in real time. Mobile phones also include newer phones or smart phones which are capable of providing internet, e-mail and other services. This case study of the Harare/Chitungwiza Region Counselling programme highlighted ways in which mobile phones could enhance the implementation of the practicum which is a key component of the degree.

Background to the study

The Zimbabwe Open University has been offering the Bachelor of Science Honours Degree in Counselling since 2000. This is the only undergraduate counselling degree being offered in the country. This has made it an attractive degree for all those who are in the helping fields. Nurses, teachers, pastors, the uniformed service members and others in the helping fields have enrolled into the degree. Most of them do not have formal experience in counselling people. Due to this, the degree programme was structured with practicum components to provide the much needed practical experience most of the students do not have. The aim is that each student gets a practical experience which has been designed to provide them with a well planned, supervised, hands-on, clinical experience in a sustainable counselling setting.

The practicum model being employed in ZOU requires that the student makes their practicum arrangement with an institution which promotes the type of counselling they want to specialize in. They approach the institution armed with introductory letters from the university and a detailed proposal indicating the type of experiences they expect to gain from the institution. This approach prepares the students for the world of work where in most cases they will be taking the initiative to develop counselling contacts with clients. This model has a three prolonged supervision procedure. The first is the counselling institution supervision procedure whereby the trainer supervises the students' performance. The second one is the university supervision procedure. The university must follow up and check how the student is progressing as part of their assessment. The last part is their peers. Peers play a very important supervisory role in that they provide feedback to their colleague in a non threatening manner. The above scenario presents challenges in an ODL set up. The distance between the various players pose challenges in real time supervision.

Studies have shown that most supervision is captured as a report which is submitted long after the event has taken place. In the ZOU this is a compilation of reports called a portfolio, which is submitted to the department long after the practicum is completed (Kaputa and Gwitimah 2012). In such circumstances, the opportunity to give pertinent feedback during or soon after the session is lost.

The use of emerging technologies like mobile phones, can help in the supervision of the practicum in real time. Emerging technologies known as information and Computer Technologies (ICTs) are slowly gaining the centre stage in Distance Education. It is a form of e-learning which is used to teach, offer guidance and even assessment. Modesto and Tau (2009) write that it enhances the communication process so that the student understands what is being taught. The growth of numbers and the distance between students and their teachers has made ICTs the preferred choice of modality for distance learning if resources allow it. If emerging technologies are current and versatile then there is every reason to explore their role in enhancing the practicum supervision and even teaching activities. The mobile phone becomes the tool of first preference because of its availability to over 58% (need to update this one with current) of the Zimbabwe population (Kabanda 2011). In this study its role is focused upon and lessons proffered to all those who may want to use it to supervise practicum, internships or teaching practice.

Statement of the Problem

How can mobile phones be used as an additional mode of ODL practicum supervision in the ZOU Bachelor of Science Counselling degree?

Research questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- How can mobile phones be used in ODL practicum conduct and supervision?
- What are the benefits of using mobile phones to the ODL students?
- What challenges are experienced by students and supervisor during the move from the traditional ODL supervision to the mobile phone supervision?
- How can the transition from the traditional ODL supervision to the mobile phone be enhanced?

Conceptual framework

The development of the e-learning platform focusing on mobile phones is encompassed in the ZOU strategy to establish a digital learning environment (Kabanda 2009). Kabanda (ibid) writes that this is comprised of the following 3 phases in the indicated time zones;

Phase 1: Production of static, non – interactive learning materials in the form of modules (1999 – 2006).

Phase 2: Conversions of the modules into e-learning format with interactive technologies and pedagogies (2007 – 2009).

Phase 3: Complete e-learning materials available on line and development of new materials (2010 – 2012).

The e-learning platform uses three types of tools; these being content tools for delivery of content, communication tools and management tools or systems for the effective management of the teaching and learning process. Content tools for delivery of content are tools that are utilized to deliver content to specific websites. Communication tools are in the form of voice calls, emails, and social networks, instate messaging, skype and so forth. Management tools or systems are used to manage all the processes which go on including teaching and learning materials. It is in the last that the mobile phone belongs. Innovative ways have to be found of using the mobile phone in managing the practicum aspect of the BSc Counselling degree.

Literature Review

Use of mobile phones in ODL Practicum

This section will look at two areas which are the conduct and the supervision of practicum. By conduct we mean the way of managing or handling the practicum, the negotiation between the student and the institution they are attached to; the communication with the trainer, the supervision, the clients, subordinates, relatives and friends of clients and their peers. By supervision we mean the act of directing or overseeing the performance or operation of the attached student (Izzard 2001). This is done by the university supervisor. This supervision also ensures that students have made arrangements that are necessary for their practicum and they have managed to fulfill them as per the regulations of their degree.

There seems to be excitement about the role of emerging technologies in ODL and indeed it is beginning to change the way we teach learners at a distance in Africa. The interactive nature of ICTs especially the mobile phone promotes experiential learning which has been to a large extent missing in most practical distance education courses (Miller 2000). The growth of the use of mobile phones has been phenomenal in the developed countries and unbelievable in the developing countries especially in Zimbabwe (Kabanda 2011). There is need therefore to temper rhetoric with reality. The reality on the ground is that students and tutors still lack skills in using these emerging technologies.

Mobile phones can be used during the conduct and supervision of practicum in addition to the print media. Despite the fact that 58% of the Zimbabwean population has mobile phones, their performance is affected by poor reception and lack of electricity. Modesto and Tan (2009) advise that ICTs for the time being be used to support the print media.

Scholars give guided statements on the role of ICTs in distance learning. Peters (2000) writes that there is need to move with caution when introducing ICTs. He sees it as a support for developing materials, delivering content and assessing the learner. In some countries like the United States of America, virtual classrooms have been created whereby students can take part in different activities which may require them to have gone into the field (Miller 2000). It is paramount that we find out how the mobile phone, which has taken a foothold in our society, can be used to improve both the conduct and supervision of the practicum.

Kabanda (2009, 2011) points out that e-learning may involve the use of any or all of the following:

- Desktop and laptop computers
- Mobile and wireless tools including mobile phones
- Software, including assistance software
- Interactive whiteboards or mimeo boards

- Electronic communication tools, including e-mail, discussion board, chat facilities, virtual classrooms and video conferencing.
- Digital cameras and videos
- Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs)
- Managed Learning Environments (MLEs)
- Learning activity management systems

The use of the mobile phone can be used in collaboration with gadgets, for example, digital cameras and videos as well as communication devices such as laptops whose products would be placed in the assessment portfolio. A portfolio is a compilation of all the best work the student would have done during the practicum.

Benefits of using the mobile phone

Mobile phones especially the smart phones when connected to wireless networks enable mobility and facilitate mobile learning. Mobile phones also allow teaching and learning to extend beyond the traditional classroom such as in the case of distance learning. Users of portable devices such as mobile phones can break the tether of the home computer and print media. Furthermore, students have increased flexibility and there is provision of new opportunities for interaction.

Mobile phones also support learning experiences that are collaborative, accessible and integrated with the world beyond the classroom. Use of mobile phones in distance learning is suitable for people on the go and there is anytime, anywhere access to content. It can enhance interaction between and among students and university supervisors for practicum purposes and also is good for just-in-time training or review of any content. It can enhance student-centered learning. Differentiation of student learning needs and personalized learning is supported through mobile phones. Finally, reduced cultural and communication barriers between faculty and students is necessitated by using communication channels that students like. Instructors also benefit in that they, too, can access services and interact with students while on the move.

Kabanda (2011; 2006) in a paper titled "The vision of Higher Education in Zimbabwe for 2040" summarises the benefit of e-learning to Zimbabwe learners as follows:

- Blending of open and distance learning that combines workplace, home and learning environment
- Comprehensive testing of the learner as the learning progresses
- Tremendous opportunities for students that want personalized instruction
- Assists in reducing digital divide among learners by use of simple education technologies
- Easier to promote uniform standards and quality of teaching
- Utilize talents and experiences of seasoned master teachers.

Challenges

The benefits, however, do not come without challenges. Use of mobile technologies may make it easier to cheat and could give test-savvy students an advantage over non-technical students. It can create a feeling of isolation or of being out-of-the-loop for non-technical students. Some content becomes outdated because of rapid upgrades on one day which may become outdated the next day. It could also require an additional learning curve for non-technical students and faculty

staff. Kaputa and Mpezeni (2009) found out that the ZOU student population is made up of mostly adult learners. Most of these adult learners lacked the technical skills to operate the new technologies. Younger learners, who were in their twenties undertaking the Psychology degree tended to be more technical and had no phobia for the new technologies.

There is need to find the benefits which would accrue to students during practicum challenges. The main challenge to this innovation is the slow growth of variables such as the availability of the appropriate mobile phones, supply of electricity for charging purposes; availability of network coverage and students and tutors skills in using the technology. Studies have shown that the SADC region boasts of low levels of computers, mobile phones, telephones, radios and telephones. Frequent use of mobile devices does not mean that students or instructors are ready for mobile learning and teaching (Corbeil and Valdes-Corbeil 2007).

Africa has lagged behind the developed world in mobile technology. Its introduction in distance learning is still in its infancy and more is needed to develop policy, infrastructure, capacitate learners and tutors in its usage and demystify mobile phones. There is need to allay people's fears on the allegation that mobile phones can cause certain types of cancers.

Suggestions for improvement

The use of mobile phones can promote ubiquitous supervision in ODL. This is possible if a number of factors are addressed. First, there is need to ensure that the infrastructure is in place. This is the advantage of the mobile phones over all the other tools. That it is in place in over half of the population and its portability. Secondly, there is need to put in place clear communication modalities for the use of the tools. The World Bank (2003) notes that the effective use of technology depends not only on the technology but on factors that are independent of the technology. For example policy issues, skills and innovative management of all ODL processes.

The use of mobile phones in ODL practicum supervision is fairly new but as shown, has great potential for the development of a wholesome practical component for the BSc Counselling degree. It is imperative that instructors learn about and adapt to the changing environments, when and where appropriate. This study focuses on that aspect and is envisaged to add more to our management of this important assessment component.

METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative study which employed a case study design. The qualitative design is constructivist in nature and helps to describe and interpret reality. It is participatory in nature thus empowering the participants. Nyaruwata (2008) points out that it helps to explore complex research areas enabling the understanding of groups or phenomena. The phenomena under study here requires such a treatment. A potential weakness is that the research is difficult to replicate therefore careful planning and analysis of data was done to ensure authenticity. This study used a single case study design (Stake 2005). Gall, Borg and Gall (1996) cite the in depth study of the phenomena and the development of likely explanations which was done in this study as its strengths. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) warn that there is need to ensure that researcher bias do not taint the results. This was counteracted by using triangulation of more than one instrument to cross check the collected data.

Due to the nature of the population and the novelty of the area under study, purposive sampling was used to select the participant. In this case, one counseling student who was attached to a local hospital was selected. Data was collected through the student's personal accounts and interviews. The instruments were piloted before being administered to the student. Consent was obtained from all the parties concerned. Triangulation was achieved through interviews with the supervisor and the trainer at both the hospital and the university. Both provided their accounts of how mobile phones were used during the ODL counseling practicum. These were in the form of mobile phone discussions in real time, written journals on the daily work, emails and face to face discussion. Trustworthiness was ensured through the development of well structured instruments and accurate and detailed data collection procedures. Ethical considerations were also met by ensuring the confidentiality of the student by using a pseudo name. Approval was granted by the ZOU Regional Province and from the hospital the student was seeking attachment. The Data Analysis followed Gall, Borg and Gall's (1996) procedure; being logical order of the data collected, development of categories of the activities, checking patterns which resulted in the development of themes. The results are presented below.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The presentation shows clearly how the mobile phone was used during the practicum. The focus of this case study was the student Spiwe (not her real name) who was attached to a hospital. Triangulation in order to avoid researcher bias was achieved through interviews with the University Supervisor/trainer (UST) and the internal hospital supervisor and mentor (HS). Spiwe was in her final year in the Bachelor of Science Degree in Counselling. At this stage, the student will have completed most of her taught courses. The practicum lasts a year and is meant to marry the theory learnt to practice. In an ODL institution, the student is at a distance from the university supervisor/trainer who needs to know the student's progress and the authenticity of the work they are producing. The use of a mobile phone was seen as a way of reducing this distance. The University supervisor/trainer (UST) is responsible for the student's progress. They prepare the student for the attachment and final assessment and may even arrange the attachment with the authorities of the institution attachment is being sought. In this case, the student made all the attachment preparations which were then approved by the UST. The HS ensures that the student carries out their tasks in line with the approved University proposal. The HS also mentors the attached student in line with their chosen counseling area. The results are presented in the order of the research questions.

The use of mobile phones in ODL practicum

Spiwe acknowledged that she uses the mobile phone to contact her supervisor/trainer whenever she is dealing with an emergency. Since this is a hospital setting this can occur at anytime of the day. An example is case 1 below of a suicidal client. She also uses the mobile phone to confirm or clarify issues she is not sure of.

The mobile phone is also used by Spiwe to update her supervisor/trainer of her progress. Sometimes she uses it to follow up clients who may need support. The mobile phone is also used by her internal supervisor and mentor to alert her of emergencies. All these activities could be done through the

current social networking systems such as whatsapp, facebook and e-mail through a telephone tailor-made for such purposes. Despite all this, it is necessary that mobile phones be used to augment the normal supervision of practicum. In an interview, the supervisor/ trainer pointed out that even in an ODL setting there is need for the supervisor to visit their students during attachment to ensure that the practicum is actually taking place. The use of mobile phones would help in improving communication. This is line with Kabanda's (2009) phases of e-learning development in ZOU.

Benefits of using mobile phone to the ODL student

Spiwe gave accounts of how her mobile phone has helped her to conduct her counseling sessions. The mobile phone helped her to get the much needed help from her UST in order to solve a problem which may have been impossible to solve during after hours. This following case which she handled involved a suicidal client.

Case 1: Handling a suicidal client

I was in a dilemma with a suicidal client who was going to be admitted into hospital but would not disclose his next of kin or their phone numbers. The hospital wanted a guarantor and a person responsible for fees. I had no idea of the way forward. I quickly excused myself and called my university trainer and supervisor for the way forward. The trainer responded by giving me appropriate advise. Since this was a high risk client, because he had attempted suicide for three times, she advised me to give the client more time to pour out his feelings in order to provide him with a sense of security and reinforce self worth.

This case shows that Spiwe was able to get the help she needed instantly through the mobile phone as she said;

- "If there was no mobile phone I would not have gotten this; in the few minutes I got helpful information"

In another incident Spiwe used her mobile phone to call UST to ensure that she had followed the correct procedures when an HIV positive patient was being discharged from hospital. Spiwe summarises her experiences on the conduct as follows;

- "My experience with supervisor/trainer on the mobile phone is to confirm that I am on the right track and I will gain confidence as I go along since the cases are dynamic. One never gets the same issues with different clients."

The UST confirmed that Spiwe contacted her whenever she met challenging clients. She acknowledges that this communication helped in also checking if she was doing the right thing. It also helped to debrief in instances where Spiwe felt she was too involved with a client's issue. Spiwe also mentioned that she did mobile counseling and followed up clients. This helped to monitor clients' progress.

Mobile phones have their benefits which ODL institutions must take advantage of in order to improve the conduct and supervision of practicum.

Challenges of using mobile phones

Results show two challenges which we need to be aware. Both the student and her supervisors agree that if the mobile phone has to work there is need for honesty. Although in this case Spiwe was honest in all her dealings, it does not mean that other students will be as truthful. There is need for other measures to cross check the authenticity of the cases being put forward. In Spiwe's case, the university supervisor/trainer and the Hospital supervisor and mentor were also in communication physically and on the mobile phone to ensure that she was following the agreed proposal. UST and HS were also in communication with the clients, the students' peers and clients' relatives and even their neighbours.

The challenge is that of reception problems. In areas where there is no electricity, it is possible that there will be poor

reception. In most instances, the student might not have the means to even charge their cell phones. Although solar chargers are available, they are expensive for most people. In this instance Spiwe was based in Harare the capital city of Zimbabwe where the networks coverage is usually satisfactory to excellent depending on the time of the day. For distant area like rural areas this challenge will be solved by the development of further resources in the form of solar chargers.

Improving transition

Studies on e-learning are in agreement that providing students with the equipment will go a long way in improving ODL. Spiwe felt that the use of mobile phones should become a standard means of communication between students and their lectures, for example, as feedback and even confirmation of results. Some ODL institutions are using mobile phones to notify students of various events including assignment and examination administration (Henning 2011). Banks have used this with their clients successfully (Sunday Mail 2013). The ZOU can follow a similar approach by gradually extending this faculty to all activities where possible.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concluded that the use of mobile phones can be used to enable students communicate and follow up their clients during practicum. It can also be used by supervisors to supervise and guide students at the attachment centre from a distance.

It however points out that this device must only be used to augment the already existing supervisory practices and instruments. Lastly, it warns that there is need to check the authenticity of the communication during the practicum lest it can be abused by unscrupulous students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommended that the mobile phone be used as an additional tool for supervising practicum in the counselling programme. The mobile phone should be used during crisis moments when students are confronted with suicidal clients.

During these moments students can be given help over the mobile phone as they help the client.

Mobile phones should also be used to follow up students who may be placed in difficult to reach areas. They should be used to update the supervisors of the student's progress. Supervisors should also use them to appraise the student's progress as part of the assessment process.

Mobile phones especially smart phones should be used to submit reports to supervisors and receive feedback from the supervisors.

It is also imperative that supervisors and trainers learn about and adapt to the changing environments, when and where appropriate in the world of technology. ZOU should capacitate its academic staff on the use of this powerful technology to enable them to supervise practicums, projects, dissertations and thesis. Further research should be carried out to find ways of using mobile phones in other spheres of ODL.

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