Title: Tutoring deeply marginalised distance learners: Challenges and achievements
Name: Godson Gatsha (PhD Candidate)

Education Policy Studies, University of Pretoria

ggatsha@bocodol.ac.bw

Abstract

This article is based on a qualitative study that focused on the experiences of 4 Tutors who provided learning support in the form of f2f tutoring and assignment feedback to distance learners from the San communities who were studying secondary school level courses whilst in very remote settlements in the western part of Botswana between 2003 and 2007. It is a case study in which two sites are used. The experiences of tutors were captured using various tools of which the journals and one to one interviews were the main sources of data collection. The 4 tutors were the only tutors at the time who were engaged in tutoring the four courses, English, Maths, Setswana, Human and Social Biology. The findings of the study indicate that whilst challenges existed, the tutors managed to navigate their ways and achieved remarkable success in retaining learners and ensuring that they completed their courses. Factors that contributed to the success are outlined and evidence of academic achievement is provided. Lessons for servicing deeply marginalised distance learners are also drawn from the study.

INTRODUCTION

Learning support in the form of face to face tutoring is considered important in enhancing throughput in open and distance learning. However learning support in undeveloped contexts appears to be a complex and least understood issue in open and distance learning practice. Of late a number of institutions have made attempts to have it but differences of learning support practices exist for example in distance education providers in Southern Africa, probably because of how learning support is conceptualised. In this article, literature on conceptions of learning support and experiences of tutors have been reviewed in order to have an in-depth understanding of how tutors perceive and

experience tutoring under the Botswana College of Open and Distance Learning (BOCODOL).

This study aims at understanding how tutors providing learning support to learners studying school equivalent courses in a unique context went about their duties of tutoring. This study was guided by the following research questions:

How have tutors facilitated learning support to distance learners studying school equivalent courses in unique contexts?

…and

What impact have they made through learning support to enhance learners' academic performance?

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Today Basarwa or San communities are classified as Remote Area Dwellers and described at a website (http:wwwgov.bw/basarwa/rural/dev.html 08/08/06) as
 marginalized in terms of socio-economic status and lacking the means for economic wellbeing. They are further described as having little access to formal education, poverty stricken, lacking employment opportunities, lacking cash income, low paying jobs, occupying places far from basic services and facilities and are made up of small scattered communities and are sometimes mobile.

Hunting as a way of life and as a subsistence alternative for the San has been severely restricted as a result the creation of commercial farming areas. They have become virtually enclosed by ranches and hunting has almost been terminated and exclusive hunting rights have become the prerogative of the owners of ranches, while the indigenous San /Basarwa are perceived as potential poachers (Good, 1993). In addition to Good's argument, the National Parks and Game Reserves Regulations of 2000 and the Wildlife Conservation and National Parks Act No 28 of 1992 have equally landed a huge blow to Basarwa's hunting and gathering economic activities. The said statutes have rendered a large number of Basarwa people destitute as they can no longer subsist

without government assistance. This state of affairs has rendered Basarwa to be perpetually marginalized as a result of lack of ownership of land and poverty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on learning support has only a few success stories and the rest is full of discourses that tells a story of isolation, alienation, frustration, delayed feedback and fear of technology (LaPadula, 2003; Dzakiria, 2005). The role of culture in learning also appears in the literature as a challenge (Venter, 2003). Despite these challenges, the literature that defines and explains the role of learning support is available (Dzakiria, 2005; Tait, 1995; Gibson, 1998; Tait, 2000; McLoughlin, 2002; Moore, 2003; Yorke, 2004; Scheer and Lockee, 2003; Thorpe, 2002; Chute et al, 1999).

The notable success story on learning support is the online survey research carried out by LaPadula, (2003) in a developed context. The study was meant to determine how satisfied the students were with the online student services and also to find out what types of services they wanted in the future. The results were that a majority of the online students were satisfied with the online student services they were receiving. Another study by Wheeler (2002) carried out with a sample of thirty respondents explored the nature of psychological distance in distance learning and identified some vital students issues that revealed that distance learners who study with the aim of merely reproducing knowledge through surface approach perceive a greater need for direction, whereas those who practice a deeper meaning centred approach require less direction support from their instructors. The results were also evident that remote students expected a great deal more from their instructors than their local peers in terms of social and practical support probably due to the psychological distance they perceive, however they expected less in terms of academic support which indicated that they perceived less need due to their independent learner status.

The Malaysian experience in open and distance learning by Dzakiria (2005) is one empirical study that reflects a discourse of isolation, frustration and alienation as demonstrated by the students' voices. The study focused on the role of learning support in distance learning at the Universiti Utara Malaysia. The findings by Dzakiria (2005) suggest that the infrequent face-to-

face meetings between distance teachers and distance learners, and learners' dependency on their teachers caused frustrations and sometimes impeded the learning process. Some distance learners were found to be unable to cope with distance learning expectations and found new ways of learning and the sets of expectations that go with it too great and in such circumstances, some distance learners expected distance teachers to play an important role in helping them come to terms with the new ways of learning. Going through the findings of Dzakiria' article the voices are desperate for attention, for a human face to provide immediate response to their problems and to guide their learning.

Given the above experiences of learning support, it appears the role of tutors in creating a conducive learning environment is critical for distance learners' success and so is tutor's interpersonal and pedagogic skills, (Chan 2002; Tait 2004)

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

There are different research orientations that focus on how knowledge is developed. The two common forms of educational research orientations are the positivist paradigm and the interpretivist paradigm. The positivist research emphasizes objectivity and the interpretivist research focuses on subjectivity or multiple realities.

Given my research questions that were concerned with the participants' experiences of learning support, this study could not be situated in the positivist paradigm but within the interpretive paradigm. The interpretive research is concerned with in-depth understanding as experienced by research participants in their natural setting.

A case study methodology was adopted in this study. I chose a case study because of my interest in obtaining an in-depth understanding of learning support as experienced by distance learners in a unique context in order to inform practice. A case study is an accepted research strategy and is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within a real life context using multiple sources.

Data was collected through a qualitative survey tool (questionnaire), a semi-structured interview and journals. Four participants were selected purposively. These participants were selected on

the basis of the fact that they had been active tutors for more than two years. The study was conducted from November 2006 to May 2007.

The limitations of this study include the use of only four participants. However, the detailed responses given by participants do offer an in-depth understanding of their tutoring experiences in a unique context. The study does not seek any generalizations however comparability to similar contexts may be made.

Findings

Facilitators' perspectives on learners' use of learning support

Kang site

Learner participation in learning support activities facilitated by part-time tutors at CSC located at Kang village was reported to be fine and challenging by tutors. Four tutors were asked to keep journals during the first term of 2007 and were requested to record their impressions on learner participation in learning support activities they facilitated. Their impressions were recorded based on the face-to-face tutorial support they provided and on the learner assignment they marked. The first two weeks of their journal keeping indicated that learners tutored by the four tutors were passive in their participation. This could have been due to the fact that some were new enrollees and as such were still adjusting.

Different facilitators completed open ended items in a questionnaire that sought to find out their impressions about the participation of distance learners both at the village and those from the remote satellite centres. Their impressions were not different. The observations made by the facilitators were that learners were at first passive and later participated actively asking questions and answering questions during the tutorials. The initial passiveness might have been due to the fact that at the beginning of the year some learners were still new and unfamiliar with each other, with tutors and unfamiliar with the way of learning through distance. However when they got used to the distance learning environment they felt comfortable and participated actively. One tutor after four weeks had this to say;

> *I was delighted by the good participation of learners when they asked questions and responded to my questions.*

Learner participation in the face-to-face tutorials included learners volunteering to solve problems on the board. However initially other learners passed remarks at those learners who volunteered. The volunteers were teased that they thought were they were intelligent and that if they were, they would not be at BOCODOL but at the University of Botswana. The tutor who conducted the tutorial picked the remarks and went out of his way to offer some guidance and counseling to the group, pointing out the benefits of such participation, the purpose of attending and the importance of respecting each other including each other's opinions when ever they meet for tutorial discussion.

During week 4, some assignments were submitted. One tutor was excited with the performance and indicated the following in his journal;

> *Six assignments were marked and all the learners got 75% and above. The reason for these high marks was in part due to the practical demonstration of the concept which has proved to be difficult over the years for most learners in assignments 1. The answers that were given were outstanding because technical terms were used appropriately with understanding.*

Apparently the rapport between the distance learners and their tutor had long been established when they were still at a local conventional school. Tutor's tutorials had from time to time conducted as planned and this was the explanation he gave; One thing positive about the interaction between the learners and I is that a sizeable number of learners we know each other from where I teach and still some we know each other from community services. This in itself helps to personalize learning."

Tutors were pleased by the fact that after week 4 of their journal keeping, learners showed signs of motivation and confidence in face to face tutorials whenever they were given tasks to solve in groups. The reasons behind this was alluded to the fact that the College regional staff had helped learners elect a learner management committee charged with seeing to it that learners assisted each other in their academic work through the

formation of study groups and in taking care of the facilities. It was assumed that this arrangement encouraged learners to engage tutors during tutorial sessions by asking questions and leading in finding solutions to problems posed. The formation of learner management committees might have made distance learners to feel empowered and responsible for their active participation in tutorial sessions and in assignment submission.

Inalegolo sites

After attending a weekend tutorial at one of the satellite at a remote settlement tutors felt that it was important that they met distance learners at learning satellite centres more regularly. The experience at Inalegolo was summarized by one tutor as follows;

> *The program started a bit late as we had to do a hut to hut hunt for learners. A few who came really appreciated the visit and the content covered during the tutorials. The learners all claimed to have not received the invitation letters to the weekend course. In future perhaps after writing letters a note can be sent through the clinic personnel who go there regularly.*

Inalegolo is 80km from Kang village, however it is not easily accessible except by a 4 by 4 vehicle, does not have public transport, telecommunication system nor postal service. The inadequate resources and other essential services like trading stores and restaurant were noted by tutors and they found it difficult to get something to eat during lunch break. The same was experienced in the other satellite. Given the challenges and the experiences tutors had, they came to the conclusion that their support for remote learners was more critical than they had thought and one made the following comment when asked about his experience;

> *I have a feeling that learners from these remote areas need most support from tutors and staff because there are no public libraries, no newspapers, no radios and very few if any educated people who can help these learners. It looks like the only support at their disposal is marked assignments and study material. To them the portion on the assignment cover where the tutor marker writes his telephone contact does not make any sense because most of them do not have the means to contact the tutor.*

Other than the above mentioned challenges, tutors also observed other difficulties that negatively affect the delivery of effective learning support services to remote learners. They cited delayed assignment despite having marked them and errors that have not been corrected in the study materials, the only source of reading and study material learners have in remote settlements. The issue of errors in study materials has been observed for a very long time now. I remember in 2002 when I joined the College we had a tutor conference where an attempt at identifying and documenting such errors was done with the help of tutors and submitted to the responsible authorities. However the failure to attend to the errors is still a major concern observed by learning support facilitators and this was how one made his observation;

> *Ever since the College started, various tutors and other stakeholders have pointed out the corrections needed in the learner study materials. One wonders why up to now the materials have not been revised. No one knows the impact on the learners of study materials riddled with errors, both work books and assignments. Some learners in remote areas, the only materials they interact with are their study books. As a result the information in these books should be accurate and up to date.*

The above scenario begs for ODL best practices to be followed all the time by ODL practitioners. The above concerns of tutors are valid and need urgent attention.

They further pointed out that their delivery of learning support to remote learners was also affected by delays in meeting their requests for example assignment marking keys and mock examination marking keys. This is how one tutor put it;

> *Every time when we need help from the regional office whereby the officers need to contact those in Gabion, we never get that help at all. If anything the help comes after an unreasonably long time. To site some living examples, I have been requesting for marking keys for assignments, sometimes even for mock examinations, syllabus for General Science and learners' study materials to no avail. Although the officers at the Headquarters do not deal with tutors directly their delayed responses to requests that we make through the regional office affect our learner support structures one way or the other.*

They also mentioned that at times poor interpersonal relations with some College regional staff members affected their morale and operations. They gave as an example of an incident when a regional staff member's conduct was unprofessional on the way back after a weekend course and said;

> *What was a bit disturbing was the fact that there was a misunderstanding between tutors and the officer we were traveling with during our journey back to base. The cause of the misunderstanding was that the officer in question had other assignments which were not official which delayed us on the way. Anyway I personally wasn't that much worried. This could be one of the reasons the officer in question has now sidelined us and we are now denied the opportunity to meet our learners whom we mark their assignments after all. Face-to-face tutorial has undoubtedly an advantage of making the learners personalize their learning as they come to know the tutor who always mark and comment on their work.*

The underlying tone of the above remark is of a committed and willing tutor who cherishes assisting learners from remote settlements. It is further amplified by yet another remark noted in the journal, that is,;

> *My impression is that it is of paramount importance for the tutor to occasionally meet the learners especially from remote areas or marginalized groups like Basarwa…… Personal issues in my opinion should not be part toward choosing teachers at the expense of learners by saying I will only take so and so with me on trip. Please understand me very well, get me clear, I am not in anyway trying to despise their credentials. My argument is that we tutors do have records of performance of these learners of their assignments and as such may be better placed to know their weaknesses.*

The sentiments expressed above demonstrate not only dedication of tutors to rendering learning support to remote learners but also indicate the discomfort with the practice that the regional remote learner service unit may have been engaged in for some time without the knowledge of management at the region. Coupled with the above is the issue of misplaced assignments. This has not gone down with some tutors and learners. Whilst one tutor captured this in his journal the other three mentioned it during my informal discussions with them. They quoted an incident in which the remote learner service unit asked them to account for assignments which they had marked and delivered back to the office only to be misplaced in the remote learner service unit office. The also found the

9

issue of being given assignments to mark and deliver the same day causing some unnecessary pressure on them given their full time jobs where their employer expects not to be short changed in services contracted and paid for.

Conclusion and recommendations

Tutoring deeply marginalized distance learners requires good interpersonal and pedagogic skills and commitment if learners are to complete their courses. Effective face to face tutoring, assignment feedback and motivational support are critical for deeply marginalized learners' persistence in distance learning. Resources should be provided to implement remote learner policy effectively in order to support tutor efforts of offering regular and schedule weekend courses.

References

Clarke, A. and Dawson, R. (1999) Evaluation Research. London: Sage
Chan, B. 2002. *A study of the relationship between tutor's personality and teaching effectiveness: Does culture make a difference?* International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning.http://www.irrodl.org/content/v3.2/chan.html
Cohen, L. and Manion, L. (1994) *Research Methods in Education*. London: Routledge.

Creswell, J.W. (1994). Qualitative inquiry and research: Choosing among five traditions. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Creswell, J.W. (1998). Qualitative inquiry and research: Choosing among five traditions. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

DEASA, (2006) Conference Report, Held at Maputo Mozambique, 24th-26th March 2006.

Descombe, M. (1998) The Good Research Guide for small-scale social research projects. Bukingham, Open University

Dzakiria, H. (2005) *The Role of Learning Support in Open & Distance Learning: Learners' experiences and perspectives,* Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education, vol.6 (2) 1-14.

Hitchcock, R.R. and Smith M.R. 1982. Settlement in Botswana-The Historical Development of a Human Landscape. Botswana Society, Gaborone.
 LaPadula, M. (2003). *A Comprehensive Look at Online Student Support Services for*

Distance Learners, The American Journal of Distance Education, vol. 17(2) 119-128.

LeCompte M. D. and Preissle J. 1993 Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research, London: Academic Press.

Leedy, P. D. and Ormrod, J. E.(2001) Practical Research Planning and Design, New Jersey: Merrill Prentice Hall.

Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E. G. (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry.* London, Sage Publications. Machtmes, K. and Asher, W. (2000) *A meta-analysis of the effectiveness of telecourses in distance education,* The American Journal of Distance Education, vol. 14(1), 27-46.

McLoughlin, C. (2002). *Learner Support in Distance and Networked Learning Environments: Ten Dimensions for Successful Design,* Distance Education, vol. 23(2).

McMillan, J. H. and Schumacher, S. (1993) Research in Education, A Conceptual Introduction, New York: HarperCollins College Publishers.

Merrian, S. B. (1988) Case Study Research in Education*,* London, Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Mutai, B. K. (2000) How to write a Quality Research Proposal: A Complete and Simplified Recipe, New York: Thelley Publications.

Neuman, W. L.(2000) Social Research Methods Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches: London: Allyn and Bacon.

Nteta, D. Hermans, J. Jeskova, P. 1997. Poverty and Plenty: The Botswana Experience, Botswana Society, Gaborone.
Patton, M. Q. (1990) Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods. London: Routledge.

SAIDE, (1994). Open Learning AND Distance Education in South Africa. Report of the International Commission. Johannesburg: SAIDE

Scheer, S. B. and Lockee, (2003). *Addressing the Wellness Needs of Online Distance Learners, Open Learning,* vol.18(2) 176-196.

Tait, A. (1995) Student in Open and Distance Learning, in Open and Distance Learning Today, Studies in Distance Education, by Lockwood, F. London, Routledge.

Tait, A. (2000) *Planning Student Support for Open and Distance Teaching*, Open Learning, 15(3), pp.287-299

Tait, J. 2004. *The tutor/facilitator role in student retention*, Open Learning, Vol. 19 (1), The Open University.

Thorpe M. (2002) *Rethinking Learner Support: the challenge of collaborative online learning.* Open Learning, vol.17 no.2

Venter, K. (2003) *Coping with Isolation: the role of culture in adult distance learners' use of surrogates,* Open Learning, vol.18(3), 1-17.

Wheeler, S. (2002). *Student Perceptions of Learning Support in Distance Education,* The Quartely Review of Distance Education, vol. 3(4) 419-429.

Yin, R. K. (2003) Case Study Research Design and Methods. California, Sage Publications.

Yorke, M. (2004) *Retention, persistence and success in on-campus higher education, and their enhancement in open and distance learning,* Open Learning, vol. 19(1), 19-32.