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EXAMINING CURRICULUM CONTENT: INVESTIGATING HOW TO KEEP DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDENTS ENGAGE

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Abstract

Distance education is popular among the education students of the Virtual University. This study aims to examine the current curriculum content in distance education to gauge if they are still able to keep the students engaged. To be able to do that, a variety of ICT technologies have been set up in the university to cater to the needs of the distance education students majoring in educational management. A qualitative methodology was used specifically using semi-structured interviews on ten randomly chosen respondents representing all the four years of college study, and a representative for each gender. This was done to capture all the possible answers they may give in terms of their cultural backgrounds, their gender and their social status.
The results showed that among their five lessons for this semester, the most popular were Conflict Resolution and Community Relations. The least popular was school finance. In terms of the level of engagement and interest levels, most of the respondents had high scores of 9 and above which showed their high interest in the course they are studying. The presence of the ICT technology has definitely enhanced their experience and most respondents have said that they are very thankful for the experiences they've had with the learning management systems (LMS) because it allowed them to interact with their co-students and teachers from Taiwan. These interactions have served as the respondents' bridge to learning how other cultures teach these particular topics and how they process their learnings as well.

Keywords: Curriculum Content; Distance Education; Educational Technology; Student Engagement.

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1. Introduction

Using current state-of-the-art technology is one aspect that distance education teachers can take advantage of in keeping their students engaged. One of these new technologies is the 3D virtual

learning environment, which is perfect for distance education since it promotes collaborative learning, something which distance education can really exploit and improve. Virtual learning environments are simply software programs or systems that were designed to help teaching and learning in an educational setting. An example of this is the learning management system (LMS) that puts a group of tools in one centralized software program which the teacher and student can use. It can also be a virtual world where students can attend class and do work (Annetta, L., et al., 2010).

An example of this is Second Life (SL) which is a multiuser virtual environment (MUVE) configured as an online world where the students can interact as avatars with people and objects in a 3-D dimensional space (Mors, A., et al., 2018). A typical set-up for this is what educators call a "sage on stage" set-up where the avatars of the students sit on the chairs while they all listen to the instructor's lecture. That set-up has no difference with the usual classroom setting so educators are looking for alternative learning techniques which support both collaborative and independent learning. In this system, educators can use different scripted tools and objects. It has created learning experiences which are responsive and engaging to individual learners (Thomas, M., 2012).

In Pakistan, distance education is being offered in several universities and the most prominent among them is the Virtual University of Pakistan (http://vu.edu.pk) which has virtual campuses all over the country. This is the best example of distance education in the country where the lessons are engaged online. Another university is the Allama Iqbal Open University (http://www.aiou.edu.pk/) which offers distance education as the mantra of the university is "Education for All". It offers a wide range of courses all done through distance education.

This study aims to examine the current curriculum content in distance education to gauge if they are still able to keep the students engaged.

2. Statement of the Problem

The attention spans of today's tertiary students are short and there are many distractions around waiting to get their attention. So it is very important for teachers to keep these students engaged with their lessons, especially if they are taking distance education lessons. This study aims to achieve the following:
1) Go over the current curriculum content of a chosen university for distance education teacher training and identify which parts are engaging or not.
2) Identify the level of engagement of distance education students in the use of current state-of-the-art technology like the 3D virtual learning environments.
3) Measuring the level of collaboration between distance education students using t h3D virtual learning environment.

3. Sample and Population

The population of the study are the distance education students of Virtual University studying for a bachelor's degree in Educational Management. However, the sample used was only ten as in-

depth interviews with the ten distance education students training to be teachers were conducted. The qualitative approach was chosen as the methodology for this study.

4. Materials and Methods

The researcher used the qualitative methodology for this study focusing on face to face semi structured interviews and random class observations. Qualitative research helps generate useful knowledge from that of individual opinions to those who apply a global outcome in life. It answers questions about what happens to the students, and why they think it's happening to them and why. The data generated by qualitative research are in the form of words of language data, whether written or oral.

The researcher came up with a set of questions because in general, qualitative studies seek to understand phenomena. Qualitative research questions are in the forms of 'what', 'how' and 'why' in describing the phenomena (Green, J. & Thorogood, N., 2018).

In terms of the class observations, the following observation criteria were followed. There will be a description of the class activity, then the level of engagement of the students based on their interest on the subject, their eagerness to do the activity and whether the activity helped them learn more about their subject. The study participants were randomly chosen with two representatives per year level, one male and one female – so as to address gender biases in the answers, if any. They were also chosen from different year levels so as to find out if there are differences in opinions based on the number of years of education study.

The participants were randomly selected by their student numbers, two for each year level and one male and one female. The researcher of the study randomly chose them. Two of the students chosen could not participate because they were busy with school work and could not find a common time to work with the researcher so the next alternate until all the respondents were able to participate. The researcher also asked for approval from the school authorities regarding the participation of the randomly selected students in this study.

Interview Questions
Here are the questions to be posed to the interviewees of this study. First of all, their profiles will be asked – gender, age, year level, course of study and years enrolled in university. Here are the general questions that will be asked from the interviewees.
1) What part of the curriculum content in distance education do you like the most and why? What ICT technology has been used to enhance the learning experience?
2) What part of the curriculum content in distance education do you like the least and why? Has the ICT technology used influenced its being unpopular?
3) Has the use of the current ICT technology made distance education subjects more interesting? In what ways?
4) How has your level of engagement improved when ICT technology was introduced into your classes? Describe the new experience and the level of engagement of the students.
5) Has the use of ICT technology improved your collaboration with other distance education students? In what way? What has improved for you after your classes? Has it made you a better teacher?

5. Results

The respondents pointed out several things that they liked most in the curriculum content of their distance education courses. First, they appreciate it if the contents of the modules are equitably given, meaning, everyone has access to them. Respondents have mentioned that they encounter content which are withheld from them due to one reason or another and it irritates them. They also like the interactive content like forums where a respondent can pose an academic question and the other students answer. It helps in their clarification process of certain parts of the lesson which are unclear to them. They also appreciate if access to information is designed in a simple but intuitive manner, allowing them to discover learnings at the pace that they find comfortable with. They also appreciate content that is laid out in a perceptible manner, meaning, that the content is enhanced with transcriptions, captions and descriptors. Students with different learning modalities can also be accommodated by this system. The students also appreciate if they are given the chance to correct their errors and be allowed to make revisions.

For the people designing the online courses, the enhancements made should be usable, so they usually stick with open-source packages like Java to develop solutions, since it is a portable, programming language that is also compatible with popular web browsers.

The online instructors have also decided on using a multi-tiered online delivery system (MOD) where the first tier consists of in-lecture activities. Then there is a Student Interaction tier which allows them to work with their instructors.

The researcher did a class observation on the topic of Leadership Traits, wherein the facilitator presented different leadership traits using actual interviews and video graphics. After the 30-minute presentation, a case study was presented to the students and they were asked what leadership types were the most suitable for the given situations. Three different situations were presented to them.
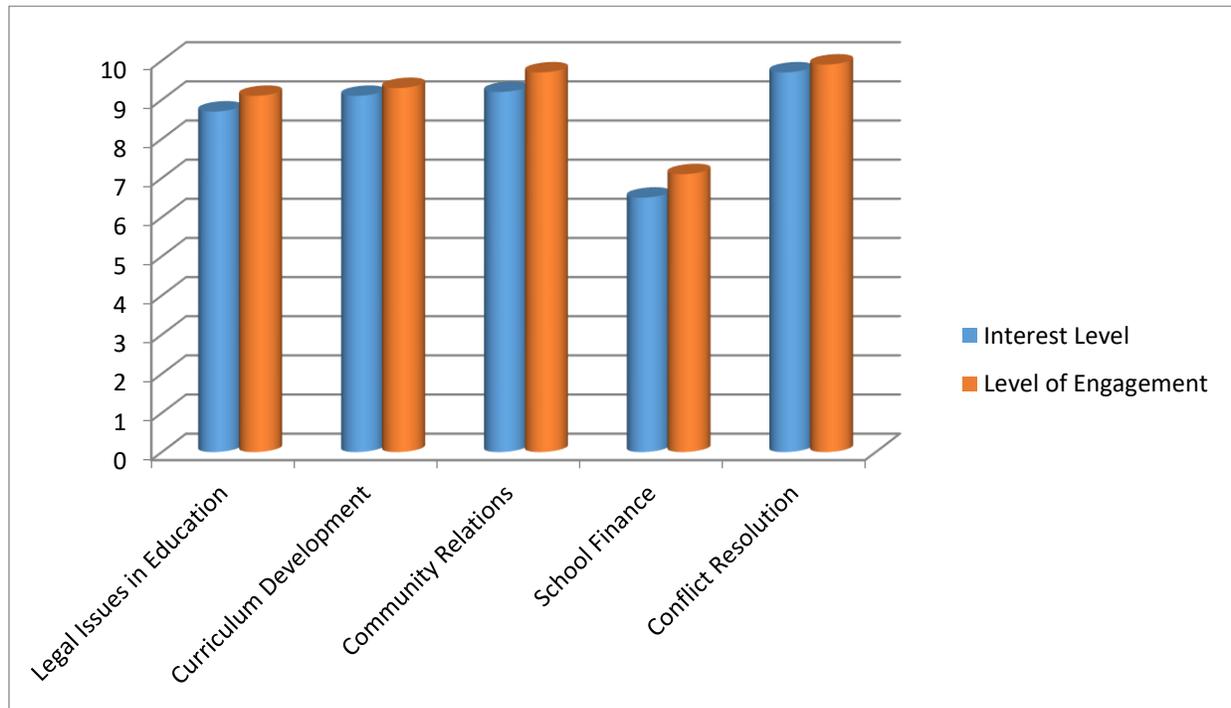
The table below shows the level of engagement and the interest level of each of the ten respondents in terms of the ICT technology used in the topics mentioned. They graded it from one to ten with one as the least level of engagement and least interest in the topic and ten as the most engaged and the most interest in the topic.

The researcher placed two quotes from the actual interviews with the respondents to bolster their chosen scores.

Student Name	Level of Engagement	Interest Level	Comments
Rawal Awan	8	9	The Second Life (SL) technology is complicated to use. It's hard to figure out what avatar my classmates are using. The collaborative nature of the LMS (learning management system) has made me work with students from my home country.

Muhammad Abid	9	9	I enjoy using all the ICT technologies available to the students. The discussions become more interesting when the teacher uses one of the 3D learning technologies.
Aasia Khan	6	8	Discussions can be simpler, sometimes technology make it more complicated. I get confused with some of the topics when too much technology is used, makes it less interesting.
Mubashir Haroon	8	9	I am not very good with technology so I am still adjusting in the class whenever we use those complicated things. I am very interested in my course so I just double my efforts to comprehend the ICT technology being used.
Aamna bibi	8	9	The learning management system allows us to meet other teachers from other countries. My interest level improves whenever we use a new ICT technology in class.
Malik Aziz	10	10	I am a bit wary with the technology being used but I strviselfied and tec since The Second Life (SL) technology is more complicated to use. It's hard to figure out what avatar my classmates are using. The collaborative nature of the LMS (learning management system) has made me work with students from my home country.
Shagufta Bibi	9	10	The scheduling of Second Life (SL) technology is complicated to use. It's hard to figure out what avatar my classmates are using. The collaborative nature of the LMS (learning management system) has made me work with students from my home country.
Majid Ilyas	10	10	I am always engaged with the lessons of my course and I don't mind which ICT technology is being The new technologies make the lessons more flashy and with.
Qubra Khan	8	10	The 3D learning environments are pretty helpful and we can create our own online profiles. The ICT technology has made it possible for me to work with other students, and other teachers from other country

| Naina Tariq | 10 | 10 | It doesn't matter what ICT technology they may be using, I still engage a high level of interacting with my colleagues.
 I am very interested in my course of study so I am not distracted by the ICT technology used. |

The graph above shows the interest level and the level of engagement of the ten respondents in terms of the five main topics being covered by their curriculum this semester - Legal Issues in Education, Curriculum Development, Community Relations, School Finance, and Conflict Resolution. The most popular subjects are Conflict Resolution and Community Relations with scores averaging around 9, while School Finance is the least interesting to them with scores below 7 for both. All these topics are being taught in the distance education program of the school for their educational management students.

6. Conclusion

The curriculum content in an online distance education course should be able to encourage students to actively engage and experience varied methods of thinking and learning that helps flex their cognitive abilities. Flexibility. Choosing the most expensive and state-of-the-art educational technology may not always be the answer because it might come out as too complex for the students to navigate. However, the online instructors should still aim to use any sophisticated technology available which can impact on the teaching and learning of the various online courses offered by the universities. Constant assessment and evaluation efforts also help in improving the available content and the idea of continuously challenging the students is something the online instructors have to think about. Furthermore, it is important to evaluate and assess the actual student-learning outcomes since that would be the barometer whether the online course is doing

its job or not. The online instructors can design curriculum content which may present different methodologies as long as they are sustainable and scalable, and help standardize the instruction process of the varied online courses being offered.

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