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VIEWS OF POSTGRADUATE DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDENTS ON THE SEMINAR PRESENTATION.

Cleophas Chidakwa, and Wellington Jonga, University of Zimbabwe

Abstract

This paper reports on a study carried out on views of Zimbabwe Open University Masters in Education (Educational Administration, Planning and Policy Studies) students on the effectiveness of using seminar presentations as a teaching strategy. The study particularly focused on capturing their views on the support they were receiving from lecturers before, during and after presentations and the availability of literature sources for preparing the seminar paper. The findings of the study show that the majority of the students thought that the seminar presentations were an effective mode of teaching course content at Masters degree level. The students also indicated that they were happy with the support they were receiving from their lecturers during the preparation and presentation of their papers. The study also noted that the students were experiencing difficulties in accessing reading materials for use when preparing their papers.

Introduction

In a conventional teaching and learning situation, the choice of an appropriate instructional delivery mode is usually left to the teacher. However, Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) as an open and distance learning institution has prescribed that students studying for their Master of Education degree in Educational Administration Planning and Policy Studies (M.Ed EAPPS) be taught and assessed using the seminar presentation mode. Although ZOU uses other instructional delivery modes (Mudavanhu et al, 2004), ZOU lecturers/tutors are required to set aside two hours out of their contact time of six hours per semester to allow students to present seminar papers. During these sessions the students are assessed on their presentations.

This requirement appears to negate the concept of distance education that requires ZOU to emphasise those delivery modes that allow students

to study at a distance, where they are physically separated from the teacher (Moore, 1973; Holmberg, 1986; Willis, 1993 and Mudavanhu et al, 2004). The presentation of seminar papers is faced with a number of problems because distance education students cannot easily access library information services (Steffi and Gale, 1995). Because of the above, it became necessary to study the views that the students had on the effectiveness of seminar presentations.

Literature review

At ZOU the seminar presentation is a tutorial that encompasses a lecture and a discussion. The student is expected to prepare an academic paper that is presented to other peers as a lecture. With the tutor's guidance the class then discuss the presentation, posing questions for further clarification to the presenter, tutor and members of the class. The seminar presentation can be classified under what Ridge and Waghid in Makoni (2000) term the 'Third Generation Instructional Systems Design Approach' in distance education. The emergence of this approach has been influenced by constructivism that emphasise learner autonomy in the construction of knowledge using their experiences. According to Ernest in Steffi and Gale (1995) the knowledge is then communicated dialogically through socially negotiated understandings.

Using this approach, the student prepares an academic paper on an agreed learning aspect from the course syllabus. The student then presents this paper to other peers in a tutorial session. Under the tutors' guidance the students then seek clarification on the content presented through the ensuing discussion. As an instructional delivery mode the seminar presentation mode has several advantages that can enhance instructional effectiveness. The presentation provides opportunities for students to construct refine and rethink hypotheses by means of feedback from peers and from a more knowledgeable tutor (de Groot in Makoni 2000). The learning process is significant in developing higher-order cognitive abilities, encouraging cooperative learning and teamwork skills such as the ability to resolve differences and conflict. In addition, presentations encourage independence in the learners and the ability to accept responsibility for one's learning. Lastly the presentation is useful in developing key communication skills such as listening, debating and defending a point of view, and inculcating in learners values such as tolerance, empathy and respect for others (Makoni, 2000).

In support of the seminar presentation Costin in Hall and Cannon (1978) advances the notion that they facilitate the acquisition of knowledge

readily by lower ability students and help students to interpret knowledge and acquire problem solving skills. The tutor is central to the success of a seminar presentation. Rogers in Hall and Cannon (1978) argues that the tutor helps to set the initial climate of the class experience through eliciting and clarifying purposes of the individual and group that make up the presentation seminar. In addition the tutor should organise and easily make available the widest possible range of learning resources. Furthermore the tutor should take initiative to share with the group their feelings as well as their thoughts in ways that do not demand nor impose but represent simply a personal sharing which students are free to accept or refuse. Lastly the tutor should accept responsibility of the intellectual content and emotionalised attitudes that characterise student learning in the way they respond to what goes on during the presentation. In support Moust and Schimdt (1995) argue that the tutor's interventions must encourage student autonomy. Their primary role is to facilitate student-learning processes by helping students to integrate and use information and to interact effectively in the tutorial.

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that most authorities are agreed that seminar presentations are an effective mode of teaching and learning. They further agree that tutors must be as unobtrusive as possible and not try to influence what students present and the experiences that their peers make of the presentation. Lastly, the seminar presentation thrives on dialogue. Dialogue as observed by Schein in Makoni (2000) must not be equated to oppositional discussion that aims at the triumph of one or the other side. In distance education, dialogue should be seen as essentially determined by a dynamic creative interplay between subject content, educational philosophy, personalities, environmental factors, medium of communication and learners individual needs. Fruitful dialogue during seminar presentations should be characterised by mutual trust. Using this approach, learners should be viewed as capable of determining what they want to learn and constructing their knowledge content and how it should be presented to meet their learning requirements. However as noted by Mudavanhu et al, (2004) some studies indicate that academics and students at conventional universities generally view distance teaching methods as inferior to the lecture method that is practised at conventional universities. The purpose of this research was to establish the views of students on the effectiveness of the seminar presentation as an instructional mode in distance education.

The study was guided by these research questions:

1. What support did students receive from their tutors before,

- during and after presenting the seminar paper?
2. To what extend were students able to obtain literature to use when preparing the seminar paper?
 3. How did the students rate the effectiveness of the seminar presentations by their peers?
 4. What problems did students cite as characterising seminar presentations and what suggestions did they give to ameliorate these?

Research Methodology

The research was a case study that sought to establish the views that M.Ed (EAPPS) students studying with ZOU in Mashonaland Central had on the effectiveness of using seminar presentations as an instructional mode. Views of both first and second year students in the programme were solicited using the survey approach (Cohen and Manion, 1989). The population of the study was the thirty students in the programme. Twelve were in Intake 8 and the remainder in Intake 7 of the programme. Convenient sampling of all the students was used (McMillan and Shumacher 1989). These were preferred as they had first hand information on seminar presentations. They had attended the seminar presentation seminar during the preceding seminars. The population was considered too small to use a random sample that requires a large population (McMillan and Shumacher, 1989). A questionnaire containing mostly closed-ended and a few open-ended question items were administered to the students on the day they were attending the seminar presentation tutorial. This day was preferred as it was thought all students would avail themselves to make their presentations. The researchers had initially planned to actually interview the students and observe the seminar tutorial. However this method proved difficult as the researchers had to take charge of some of the tutorial classes. The researchers had to settle for the questionnaire that saved time and was easy to administer in the absence of the researchers. A major limitation of the methodology used is that it will be very difficult to generalise the findings to all the country's ten regions that administer ZOU students.

Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies on each of the variables investigated were collated and aggregated to enable the researchers to come up with the respondents' viewpoint on the issue.

Results and discussion

The questionnaires were administered to the thirty M.Ed (EAPPS) students who were studying with ZOU in Mashonaland Central Province. Their responses were tabulated and are presented below according to the research questions identified for the study.

Support received from lecturers before, during and after presentations

The students were asked to indicate the support they were getting from lecturers in connection with seminar presentations. The findings are tabulated in Table 1 below: the findings generally reveal that lecturers were assisting students in a variety of ways with their seminar presentation papers.

The findings in Table 1 below indicate that the majority of respondents 87 percent were directed on the sources to consult, 83 percent were advised on the content to include in the paper and 60 percent first discussed the seminar presentation paper with their tutors before presenting and this facilitated noting areas that needed to be improved. These findings imply that students were receiving help from their tutors on how to prepare and what to include in the papers.

Table 1: Respondents' views on the nature of support they were getting from their tutors (N=30)

	Yes	No	Total
Students are advised on the content to include in the paper	83%	17%	100%
Students are helped to structure the paper	67%	33%	100%
Students are directed on which sources to consult	87%	13%	100%
Students are provided with the reading materials	30%	70%	100%
Students are invited to consult lecturers with their presentations before making them	30%	70%	100%
Students discuss the paper with their tutors before presenting, noting those areas that need to be improved.	60%	40%	100%

The finding that tutors directed students on sources to consult when preparing the seminar papers is quite significant. The contact with tutors ensured that the students were directed to information rich sources in the

area of study. This would guarantee that whatever information they got from these sources and presented to their peers would be relevant and useful to the area of study. Consulting knowledgeable tutors and relevant sources before presentation would also assist to build the confidence of the students. The students who attended the seminar presentation were also assured of benefiting from information from the relevant literary sources that they may have failed to access.

The provision that students could ask questions during the seminar session enabled further clarification and understanding on the concepts they were learning. This would help prepare them adequately for the examination in the area of study. The seminar presentation sessions also presented opportunities for the students to consult with the presenter and to get a copy of his/her paper so that they could refer to these during revision at a later date.

Availability of literature sources for the seminar presentation paper

The respondents were asked to indicate if they were able to easily access reference materials to use when preparing the seminar presentation papers. Overall, the results show that students difficulty in getting this information. Table 2 below presents the findings. The Five Point Likert Scales that was used to measure their responses has been compressed into a three-point scale of Agree, Unsure and Disagree to facilitate analysis.

Table 2: Respondents' views on the availability of literature sources for the Seminar paper.

	A	U	D
The information was readily available from literary sources suggested in the reading lists	50%	10%	40%
The information for the paper was available from the course reading material	47%	23%	30%
Students could access the information from sources obtainable in the Regional Centre Library	57%	7%	36%
The information could only be found from reading materials supplied by the lecturers	14%	16%	70%
Students could access the information from other libraries	60%	10%	30%

A=Agree

U=Undecided

D=Disagree

The data in the table above shows that more than half, 60 percent of the respondents were able to access the information they used when preparing their seminar presentation papers from other libraries other than the Regional Centre Library at ZOU. Another half of the respondents showed that they referred to those sources suggested in the course reading lists. Tutors rarely supplied students with reading materials as supported by 70 percent of the respondents.

The findings above seem to suggest that information for use in preparing seminar presentation papers was not easily accessible to most of the students. These findings gain further support from the observation that the majority of ZOU students stay in rural areas where they find it difficult to access library information services (LIS). The prevailing harsh economic climate resulting in higher transport costs that are above what most commuters currently afford could be further making it more difficult for these rural students to travel to and fro in search of relevant reading materials that could assist them in preparation for their seminar papers. Just slightly over a half of the students indicate that they were able to access the Regional Centre Library. These could be those students lucky enough to stay and work in areas that were near to the Regional Centre. The observation that tutors rarely supplied students with reading materials further adds to their inability to access the correct and relevant materials in their area of study. This is despite the earlier findings that the tutors helped to direct students on the correct sources to consult. A common observation is that most tutors consider it risky to lend students their copies of relevant reading texts in the courses that they may be teaching and which students are studying. They fear to lose their books as the chances of those who borrow them failing to return them are greater. This casts doubt on the quality of preparation that go into the production of the seminar paper.

Support given to students by tutors during seminar presentations

The researcher also sought to establish the nature of help that students were getting from their tutors during seminar presentations. The findings that are presented in table 3 below.

Table 3: Respondents' views on the help they were receiving from tutors during Seminar presentations.

	Always	Sometimes	Never	Unsure
Tutors allow adequate time for presentations	10%	64%	13%	13%
Tutors allow students to go through their papers without interruptions.	33%	47%	10%	10%
Tutors allow students to clarify issues during presentation	50%	40%	0%	10%
Tutors give comments that support student presentations	40%	50%	0%	10%
Tutors give comments that require students to read further on the topic presented	50%	43%	0%	7%
Tutors assist students by filling in the knowledge gaps that have been left out by the presentation	57%	33%	0%	10%

The researcher went on to establish the opinions that respondents had on the support that tutors gave to students during the presentation of their seminar papers. The results show that most of the respondents acknowledged that they were being assisted in one-way or another and at one time or another by their tutors. Most, 90 percent of the respondents indicated that their tutors filled in the knowledge gaps that they left out during presentation, gave them supportive comments and allowed them to clarify issues raised during presentation. However, 80 percent of the respondents indicated that their tutors preferred that they go through their presentations without interruptions. Although 74 percent of the respondents replied that they were allowed enough time to present, the qualitative responses received show that the majority of the sample were not happy with the time they were allocated to make their presentations.

The findings that tutors were willing to assist students suggest that the presentations were corrected during seminar discussions. This would ensure that the misconceptions by students were set right and that those students who attended were exposed to correct body of knowledge. This would enhance their understanding and preparation for the examinations.

Evaluation of the effectiveness of seminar presentations

Respondents were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the seminar presentations by their peers. Their responses illustrate that they viewed these as effective. Data are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Respondents' views on the effectiveness of seminar presentations by their peers

	Effective	Not Sure	Not effective
Presenters experiment with new ideas and apply these to practical situations in their field of study	86%	7%	7%
Presenters display wide reading in their presentations	86%	7%	7%
Presenters show mastery of the content they present	77%	10%	13%
Presenters argue convincingly in support of issues they raise	77%	7%	16%
Presenters are able to generate new knowledge	77%	20%	3%

Lastly, the study established the ratings of students on the effectiveness of their peers' presentations. Overly, they saw these as effective. The findings are presented in Table 4 above. The Five-Point Rating Scales of very effective to very ineffective were compressed into a three-point scale of effective, not sure and not effective. The table illustrates that there were no differences between those respondents, 86 percent who replied that the presenters experimented with new ideas and applied these to practical situations in the field of study and that they displayed wide reading in their presentations. Similarly, those respondents, 77 percent, who posited that the presenters showed mastery of their content, were equal to those who said they were able to generate new knowledge and that they were able to argue convincingly in support of the issues they had raised during the presentation of their papers. These findings imply that the sample was convinced that the seminar presentation was an effective instructional delivery mode.

The findings imply that the students were finding the seminar presentations useful in enhancing their knowledge and understanding in their areas of study. This may not be surprising as they were exposed to various literary sources on the subject, and received corrections during the seminar tutorial sessions. The distance education students in Zimbabwe are usually information starved. Most students, cannot access the most recent editions of the print media due to the constraints they experience to get access to established Library Information Resource Centres. These students would welcome information from whatever source. The seminar presentation provides opportunities for students to gain, share and experiment with learning material in a participatory group setting. The assurance that experts in a face-to-face interactive

situation refer the information they get during seminars becomes an added advantage in enhancing the learning process. Those students who will have lost direction during the course of their studies are redirected to new knowledge sources and refocused on what they can do so as to do well in their studies. This undoubtedly makes the seminar presentation a worthwhile learning experience for distance education students.

Conclusions and recommendations

The following conclusions result from the findings obtained from this study:

- Tutors were directing students to relevant reading sources in preparation for the seminar tutorials; however the majority of students had difficulty in accessing these sources in preparing for their seminar presentation paper.
- The students acknowledge that the tutors sometimes corrected them during the seminar thereby ensuring that they became exposed to the correct body of knowledge.
- The students were happy with the efficacy of seminar presentations.

The researchers make these recommendations to ensure that seminar tutorials remain effective as a teaching strategy with distance education students:

- More time be given to seminar tutorials for effective learning to take place
- ZOU should make available to students photocopies of relevant reading course materials since the modules currently in use appear outdated.
- A further study is also conducted to capture the views that the tutors have on the practice of using seminar tutorials as a delivery-learning mode with distance education students at ZOU.

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