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Assessment of Social Learning Platforms on Students' Engagement and Retention in National Open University of Nigeria

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Abstract

Social learning Platforms is important channel of facilitation. National Open University of Nigeria which is one of the open and learning institutions in Nigeria have introduced these modes of instruction for her students in recent times. It is because of this that the study seeks to assess the impact of these modes of instruction to students in National Open University of Nigeria. Two questions were formulated, moreover, qualitative approach was adopted. Focus group was used, Moreso, thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Findings indicated among others that the use of these modes has encouraged students to actively participate in various academic activities. The recommendations reached among others is that university management should provide laptops to every student to enable them to participate in the lecture.

Keyword: Social Learning Platforms, Students' Engagement, Retention, Open and Distance Learning Institutions

Introduction

The integration of technology into education has significantly transformed teaching and learning processes especially in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Among the technological advancements, Social Learning Platforms (SLPs) have emerged as indispensable tools for fostering learner engagement and retention. The platforms combine pedagogy and technology to create dynamic and interactive virtual spaces which allow learners to collaborate, communicate, and actively engage with peers, instructors, and educational content. Features of SLPs which play a crucial role are discussion forums, live chats, multimedia sharing, group projects, and real-time feedback foster collaboration and critical thinking involved on ODL settings (Wang et al., 2022). In National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), the institution adopts SPLs in expanding access to learning for diverse learners which include professionals, rural inhabitants and non-traditional students. Despite its flexibility, ODL faces persistent challenges, particularly in terms of learner engagement and retention. The use of SLPs can enhance learner engagement by offering interactive tools that encourage communication, collaboration, and idea-sharing, helping to combat the isolation often felt in ODL settings (Wang et al., 2022). However, the use of SPLs in ODL institutions necessitated the active engagement of students in learning process and teachers on the teaching activities. Furthermore, SPLs initial students' retention through students enrolled and committed to completing their courses. For ODL institutions such as NOUN, students' engagement and retention is crucial as high dropout rates among students. Aydin, Öztürk, Büyükköse, Er, and Sönmez (2019) argued that the basis for learners to drop-out might be unsatisfactory results in exams, lack of application of SPLs, lack of knowledge about the open education system, time management issues, unsuitability of the registered program, interference of daily life routines on studies, and some personal problem. On the other hand, Bağrıracık Yılmaz and Karataş (2022) says that the quality of educational and technical support such as the provision of SLPs by the institution is important in the reduction of students drop out in ODL institutions. In the light of



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the narrative, the study seeks to examine the assessment of SLPs on Learners' Engagement and Retention in National Open University of Nigeria.

Objectives of the study

The following research objectives were formulated to guide the study, listed below;

1. Examine the Social Learning Platforms (SLPs) most frequently used by NOUN students for academic engagements.
2. Assess the impact of Social Learning Platforms (SLPs) on students' engagement and retention NOUN over the last five academic years.

Research Questions

Considering the above stated objectives, the research questions were out to guide the study;

1. Which Social Learning Platforms (SLPs) are most frequently used by NOUN students for academic engagements?
2. What is the impact of Social Learning Platforms (SLPs) on students' engagement and retention in NOUN over the last five academic years?

Theoretical Framework

The theory that underpins the study is known as social learning theory (SLT) propounded by Albert Bandura in 1977. This theory says that people learn by observing, imitating the behaviours, attitudes and emotional reactions of others. Bandura opined that SLT cardinal points are that Learning is not purely behavioral, rather, it is a cognitive process that takes place in a social context. Secondly, learning can occur by observing a behavior and by observing the consequences of the behavior (vicarious reinforcement). Thirdly, learning involves observation, extraction of information from those observations, and making decisions about the performance of the behavior (observational learning or modeling). Thus, learning can occur without an observable change in behavior. Fourthly, reinforcement plays a role in learning but is not entirely responsible for learning, and, that the learner is not a passive recipient of information, rather, cognition, environment and behaviour all reciprocally influence each other. Considering the above discussion, Akers and Jennings (2015), Deaton (2015, p.20) argued that "social media technologies have fundamentally changed the way that social interaction occurs within our world." In addition, teachers at all levels adopt social media to engage students in a new paradigm of human interaction and social learning. Applications of social media have been used in the classroom to promote critical thinking and reflection (Daniels & Billingsley, 2014). Rumjaun and Narod (2025) is of the view that to "enhance the cognitive processes of attention, memory, and motivation, social media provides a platform for improving learning in a social context." Based on the above discourse, the theory is relevant as it would be used to look at influence of social learning platforms on learners' engagement and retention in NOUN.

Literature

In recent times, learning and teaching activities in higher institutions have taken place on SLPs. It, therefore, obvious that learning and teaching processes have migrated from the conventional face-to-face level to virtually platforms. From all indications, these platforms have created virtual learning communities that replicate the collaborative and interactive dynamics of traditional classrooms (Okoro & Uche, 2021). In fact, this is affected by offering avenues of communication such as discussion forums, real-time messaging, collaborative projects, and feedback systems. SLPs foster a sense of belonging, enhance motivation, and support meaningful engagement among learners. Moreover, SLPs provide opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction and mentorship, which are critical for sustaining learner's commitment, therefore, reducing feelings of isolation. Babayev (2025) stated that "social platforms have become major tools in language learning recently." Social networking sites like YouTube, Skype, Instagram, Facebook (Akpan, 2023), and Twitter provide learners with the opportunity to keep in touch with native speakers in cultural contexts and pick up the language how it is used in everyday speech (Huseynzade, 2025). During COVID-19 pandemic, Zoom, Skype and Microsoft Teams were frequently used social platforms in language learning in the universities globally to avoid the spread of the disease (Babayev, 2021). Aside from using platforms for disease spread, student communities are usually encouraging using social platforms for collaborative learning, therefore, creating a sense of belonging among learners (Alsenafi, AlSabbagh, Alhaji & Alghasab, 2024). It is not out of place to argue that learners do not have to stay in pre-defined teaching constellations, instead, they choose their own learning cohorts. Furthermore, Alalwan et al. (2019) also submitted that social media enhances students' learning activities by providing them with another platform to share their knowledge, information, and discussions with others.



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Despite the numerous advantages of SPLs, the issue of students' engagement, therefore, comes into play. Here, students' engagement refers to "students' active participation in educational activities as well as their dedication to academic goals and learning" (Chiu, 2021). In another vein, Qureshi et al. (2021) opined that students who take part in the learning process usually learn better than others. Patricia Aguilera-Hermida (2020) argued that students' engagement positively influences their learning performance. The retention level of students using SPLs has advanced. Reynolds et al. (2009), Sengupta and Williams (2021) declared that students' academic success is enhanced when institutions offer various academic and social programs to support students and develop processes that encourage student participation in the programs. Similarly, SPLs are effective avenue for raising students' satisfaction and retention through alleviating their feelings of isolation and lack of impersonal interactions (Li et al. 2014).

Methodology

The study adopts qualitative approach. However, the choice of qualitative method is to unravel the influence of social Learning platforms on learners' engagement and retention in NOUN. In line with qualitative method deployed for the study, interpretive paradigm was adopted respectively. Drawing from Almeida's (2018) position the reason for the adopting interpretive paradigms is to use as a lens for a more thorough exploration of complex issues of social learning platform on learners. The population for the study is the final-year undergraduate students in NOUN across various faculties in NOUN. According to official document from the office of the Registrar indicated that there are 4267 students. Moreso, purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample size of 40 participants. From the above sample size, it is incumbent to state that the reason for the use of small sampling size is to explore the problem space and identify potential issues. Moreover, small sampling size is used to allow for detailed, nuanced data collection and analysis.

The instrument for the study is semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview bothers on the research questions earlier stated, and it consists of fifteen questions. The choice of semi-structured interview aside from understanding the phenomenon under investigation, Johnson and Matthews (2021) says that it is out for in-depth information regarding students' experiences on the effective use of the platform for academic advancement or otherwise. In line with qualitative methods used, the trustworthiness of the instrument was established through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Before the interview, the researchers ensured that all ethical issues were adhered to. For instance, to ensure that participants willingly accept in the participation of the research, a Consent Form (CF) was designed, and it was given to each participant to sign indicating their voluntary participation in the study. The researchers did not employ any research assistant, rather, they used focus group for the study. In other words, the 40 participants were grouped in four groups, that is, ten participants per group. Each researcher was armed with an audio recorder and field note during the interview. After the interview, the information was collated, and it was transcribed using Nvivo (software for transcription and data analysis). After transcription, the data was subjected to open coding for categorisation. Moalusi (2020, p.85) stated that "categorisation of data is necessary for a qualitative study to reduce the number of concepts a researcher must work with and to build a big picture of the issues salient to understanding a social phenomenon under investigation." After categorisation of the data, the emergence themes were analysed using thematic analysis. Drawing from Lochmiller (2021), the choice of thematic analysis is to identify the recurring patterns that are presented by researchers as overarching statements or themes.

Presentation of Results

Research Question 1: Which Social Learning Platforms (SLPs) are most frequently used by NOUN students for academic engagements?

The themes which featured prominently from the participants' responses were as follows: NOUN students used Zoom and Moodle.

Students used to Zoom

Participants were asked on the SLPs that were mostly frequently used, in their responses they unanimously said that they frequently used Zoom for their academic activities. In fact, Focus Group 'A' believed most lecturers in all departments in the university used zoom to interact with the students during facilitation. When the interviewers interrogated the participants why they frequently used zoom for their academic activities, Focus Group 'A' responded:



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It is a pleasure to inform you that zoom is the easiest way to use it in class. With the link provided by the lecturer, one can easily link up to the class. Furthermore, aside from the easy nature of this mode, it is cheap to buy data for its use.

In a similar vein, Focus Group ‘C’ said that zoom is one of the modes of communication that students use in the university frequently. When the interviewers probed further why students in this university used it frequently. In response, Focus Group ‘C’ opined that “*it is frequently used because it can be assess through one mobile phone.*” You know, every student in this campus have a mobile device.” From the above except, it is obvious and undeniably fact that zoom is mostly used by National Open University of Nigeria students. In fact, based on the participants’ assertion, zoom is easy to be used by all students in the university because of accessibility of the data from internet providers.

Usage of Moodle by Students

Another mode in which National Open University of Nigeria students used frequently is moodle. The participants from Focus Group ‘D’ categorically mentioned that moodle is a free, open-source online learning platform, or learning management system used by most universities to deliver online lectures to students. Aside from the above notion, Focus Group ‘D’ went on to say that moodle allows lecturers to manage courses and create interactive learning environments with activities like quizzes and forums and track student progress. Similarly, Focus Group ‘B’ informed the interviewers that this mode of communication is newly introduced by the university management, therefore, it is not commonly used by most of the lecturers. However, few lecturers in some departments are using this moodle to facilitate their courses in this university. At this juncture, the interviewers probed further if zoom and moodle which one is commonly and frequently used by the lecturers. Responding, Focus Group ‘A’ insisted that zoom is frequently used more to facilitate online courses than moodle. From the above discourse, it is enough to argue that moodle mode of online facilitation is not frequently and commonly used like zoom. Though few lecturers in National Open University of Nigeria used this mode for their online facilitation. Moreso, participants (students) submitted that this mode of online interaction is rarely used, since it was introduced in the university newly, hence the students could not adapt to this method of facilitation.

Research Question 2: What is the impact of Social Learning Platforms (SLPs) on students’ engagement and retention in NOUN over the last five academic years?

From all indications, the themes that emerged from the analysis of the data are as follows: Zoom and moodle enhances academic performance, enhances students’ participation and retention of students.

Zoom enhances students’ academic performance

The entire participants for the study informed the interviewers that since the introduction of zoom and moodle facilitation in NOUN, students’ academic performance has improved significantly in recent times. In fact, Focus Group ‘C’ and ‘A’ stated that since the introduction of modes of facilitation, students can study effectively. Moreover, these Focus Groups were of the view that when they read their course materials before explanation by the lecturers, they can comprehend difficult concepts of the course(s). Additionally, Focus Group ‘B’ said that when these modes of communication were not in use in the university, students find it difficult to read on their own and comprehend. When the interviewers probed further what happens if any student misses a class, Focus Group ‘D’ replied:

Sir, we want to inform you that these modes of facilitation are the best thing to happen. If any student misses the online facilitation, there are ways he or she would listen to the lecture during his or her space time. The link for the online facilitation missed would be sent to the whole student. Therefore, anyone that missed can listen to it.

The above excerpt indicated that since the introduction zoom and moodle as modes of online facilitation, students’ academic performance has improved since the last five years. In fact, students listen to online facilitation through these modes of communication. When the interviewers ask the participants what would happen if a student missed this online facilitation? In answering this question, it was revealed that students are/are given the opportunity to listen to already recorded one in his/her comfort time and zone.

Students’ participation in class activities

Another theme featured from the data analysis is that of students’ participation in class activities. Focus Group ‘A’ narrated that since the introduction of the SLPs by the university management in 2021, students in all departments have taken their studies seriously unlike previous years when these modes used were not introduced. Similarly, Focus Group ‘C’ informed these researchers that the introduction of this method of facilitation is the best for the students. This is because it allows students to participate actively during facilitation. When the interviewers asked the participants to explain on this assertion,



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they replied, “we are compelled to actively participate on the facilitation by ensuring that all students who offer participate on the discussion virtually and answer certain questions put up by the lecturer.” In the same vein, Focus Group ‘D’ reported that few lazy students who always exhibit unconcern attitude towards their studies are forced to engage actively in the studies. Additionally, Focus Group ‘B’ mentioned that this mode of instruction allows students to also participate in the assignment given by the lecturer. The above narrative by the participants revealed that due to the introduction of SLPs students were made to engage actively in the class. In fact, according to these participants the application of SLPs for instruction necessitated students to participate in the assignment given by the lecturers.

Retention of students in School

All the participants unanimously agreed that the introduction of the mode of instruction is a worthwhile gesture. The reason advanced by Focus Group ‘B’ was that the mode of instruction introduced by university management has made students focus on their studies. Moreover, before now many students were compelled to drop from the university because of their ability to measure up with the demand required by the studies. When the interviewers probed further how they understood that there is a drop-in attrition rate on the population of students, they replied:

Sir, we want to advise you to go to the registry department of the university and request the retention rate of students. You would discover that the retention rate of students’ population is high, when one compares it with what is obtainable ten years ago.

In addition to above students’ of Focus Group ‘B’, It was stated by Focus Group ‘D’ that the last year (2024) they glanced through the University Bulletin, they discovered that there is a dropped on attrition rate of students population and that students who dropped out of the university are made to re-enroll for the completion of their studies due to the introduction of SLPs by the university management. The above excerpt from the participants indicated that because of the introduction of SLPs by the university management, students’ retention rate is high, and the attrition rate is extremely low when one compares with years gone by.

Discussion of Findings

From the findings, it was indicated that the SLPs used most frequently by NOUN students for academic purposes were zoom and moodle. The past five years brought about the introduction of SLPs by the management of the university. From all indications, students’ usage of zoom and moodle was encouraging and effective. Despite the fact there are many modes of instruction such as google classroom, telegram, among others, however, students of NOUN frequently used zoom and moodle. It may be argued that the basic reason for the use of these two modes is based on the fact it is the cheapest and access for students. At least, it is obvious that every student has mobile phone in which he/she can link to lecture facilitation. This finding is supported by Olawole (2016) who held that undergraduates of Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile Ife, Nigeria frequently made use of zoom and moodle for their field trip in geography. Furthermore, Edobor, Solomon and Omwanghe (2023) opined that undergraduate student from public universities in Edo state adopted zoom and moodle their utilization during academic activities. The impact of SLPs on NOUN students was enormous. In fact, the findings from the second question have shown that zoom and moodle enhance students’ academic performance, promote students’ participation in the class and it brought about students’ retention in the university. Students offering one programme or the other in an open and distance institution in Nigeria use zoom and moodle. The use of zoom and moodle as modes for instruction significantly impact students’ academic performance. Aside from the fact that these modes of instruction promote academic performance of students, it also enhances participation in academic activities. It may be argued that virtual interaction between students and lecturers promotes effective communication which eventually leads to students’ participation in class activities. The use of zoom and moodle despite motivating students to study hard, the attrition rate of students in the university is equally low which prompts high retention rate. These findings collaborated with Alameri, Masadeh, Hamadallah, Ismail, Fakhouri (2020); Ezeude Nneka, Akonu Stephanie and Elochukwu (2023) who claimed that these platforms significantly impact students’ participation and retention in the universities. In another circumstance, Mohammed, Ekpo, Olatunde-Aiyedun, Zakari and Ogar (2025) reported that zoom and moodle motivate students to take their studies seriously.

Conclusion

NOUN is known for open and distance learning in Nigeria. It serves thousands of people by educating those who could not access conventional university institutions. The last ten years of the institution have witnessed poor academic participation, low academic performance and high attrition rate. However, with the introduction and usage of SLPs during facilitation by



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the university management, NOUN students have positively and undeniably participated in various academic activities. Furthermore, students' academic performance has reached all time high since the use of SLPs as modes of instruction during facilitation. The aftermath of students' participation in various academic activities played a crucial role in raising students' academic performance. This discourse eventually led to students' retention in NOUN, which the university management graduated about 17,420 students at its 14th Convocation Ceremony last April 12, 2025.

Recommendations

From all indications, the findings indicated that introduction and usage of SLPs by the university management has encouraged NOUN students to participate in various academic activities, reduced poor academic performance and raised students' population. It is, therefore, recommended that;

1. University management should provide internet in all study centres for NOUN students to use since most of them hardly have data to participate in the facilitation.
2. From interview, it was informed by the participants that majority of the students use mobile phones for facilitation. Therefore, university management should provide laptops for students who could acquire one to ease their participation in the lecture.

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