

**Using Cluster Meetings to Reduce Learner Isolation and Improve Completion Rates in
the Distance Teacher Upgrading Programme in Malawi**

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Abstract

In an attempt to improve student's retention and completion rates per cohort, a support system of cluster meetings was introduced in the ODL programme for the upgrading of teachers from certificate to diploma level in education. The primary teachers who enrolled into the programme were all teaching in Community Day Secondary Schools in a gap-filling arrangement to deal with a critical shortage of qualified secondary teachers. The introduction of study circle and cluster meetings at the beginning of the programme was to provide the teacher learners with opportunities to support each other and institute in them a sense of belonging to cohorts so that they could aim at working towards the same completion dates. The cluster meetings have continued to be well patronized by successive teacher-learner cohorts ten years after the introduction of the programme. The study investigated the motivational factors for such meetings and whether the factors were specific to subject combinations or gender. The study collected data through interviews with programme managers and cluster leaders and questionnaires for teacher learners and field supervisors. It was found out that students saw cluster meetings as simulations of classes in the face-to-face programmes which unified them for a common goal. Through sharing experiences and study goals as well as challenges, teacher learners felt encouraged to work as teams to improve individual performance and meet datelines for assignments. It was concluded that cluster meetings provided peer support which propelled achievement by reducing isolation and increasing the motivation of learners in a distance education programme.

Introduction

A distance education programme must be instituted with an appropriate support system for learners to individually achieve the goals they set prior to enrolling for the programme. This is especially true of a teacher training programme which is often introduced with the intention of training teachers while allowing them to teach at the

same time. Such a programme ensures that teacher shortfall and quality in deprived schools are addressed at the same time and avoids the cost of replacing teachers who would have gone on full time education (UNESCO, 2002). Because the training is linked to career progression, it is not surprising that an upgrading programme tends to enjoy high patronage with potential candidates always competing for places to improve their career prospects. The candidates that get into the programme usually have the greatest desire to succeed to move to the next level of their employment ladder. It is, therefore, important to ensure that the learner-support system provided for an ODL teacher training programme maximizes on the number of learners that successfully complete the programme.

From the onset, the teacher upgrading programme for primary teachers serving in secondary schools provided a field learner-support system that ensured student interactions among themselves and with supervisors and college lecturers throughout the period of the study. The key components of the support system included the following: first, is the eight week residential component at the beginning of an academic year where students are introduced to the annual programme of study and provided with course materials and assignments they would be expected to complete during the academic year. Second, is the field supervision provided by the field supervisors who gave on the spot academic support and encouragement to learners. This ensured learners' timely submission of assignments and attendance to important activities of the course. Third, is the presence of cluster and study circle meetings which were to be conducted every month and every week, respectively. This was a humanizing aspect of the programme to address students' needs of academic and non-academic concerns (Maroba, 2004) which could otherwise have affected individual learning progress. It was anticipated that the learners with multiple responsibilities in the rural and isolated environments (Craig, Kraft, and du Plessis, 1998) would find it difficult to study each by themselves.

This study examined the contributions of study circle and cluster meetings to learner success in the teacher upgrading programme. Both the cluster and study circle meetings provided the face-to-face support which added human voice to the learner support system (Modesto & Tau, 2009). The question for investigation was: To what extent do study circles and cluster meetings account for the performance of teacher

learners with various combinations in the upgrading programme? In addition, the study also examined the opinions of learners with various subject combinations regarding the usefulness of the study circles and cluster meetings in supporting learners of various combinations and years of study. It was of interest to understand whether the learner support systems that the meetings provided was gender or subject specific and year dependent. Each of the groups was asked how they would be affected if both study circles and cluster meetings were removed from the learner support systems.

Relevance of Cluster and Study Circle Information in a Teacher Education Programme

The preparation of teachers is not enough when the trainees' exposure is limited to theoretical knowledge covering academic content and theories of learning only. It is the teaching practicum which provides the realities of the profession which in turn creates concrete images of the career ahead of the training. In a face-to-face programme attempts are regularly made to improvise interaction with students in peer teaching and this becomes necessary to build the character and behaviour of teachers while in training. The provision of cluster and study circle meetings would in a way provide the peer element which is necessary to enable trainee teachers to try out new things without the risk of messing up with the actual students. Character building would be impossible in a solitary work environment in which trainees are not sharing experiences with their peers. While the opportunity for the learners to regularly work with real students in the schools is readily available for the ODL learners, the pressure of wanting to do it right usually undermines the opportunity to tryout new things that could be polished up later.

The collection of study circle and cluster meeting information in a teacher education programme must be exhaustive in order to have a clear grasp of how the support system contributes to the making of teachers. While the use of centres in ODL has been associated with tutorial sessions in meeting academic and affective aspects of the programme such as counselling (Maroba, 2004), in a teacher programme it is necessary to establish how such meetings influence improvement of teaching skills. The ODL programme for training teachers or upgrading of their knowledge and skills capitalizes on the immediate transfer of such knowledge and skills to students who are

taught by the teacher learners. It is therefore, necessary to ensure that the learner support system for such programmes ensures that teacher learners are assisted in having their skills upgraded to improve on their teaching to ensure students achievements. The study, therefore, sought evidence of how the programme addressed the teachers' desire to improve delivery of the teaching service in their subject areas.

Several stakeholders were sampled to participate in the study as informants from whom the data were collected. The key informants were the teacher learners themselves who were the direct beneficiaries of the learner-support system of the programme. These were considered in two categories of cluster leaders and ordinary participants by gender and year of study. One hundred teacher learners were systematically selected from existing lists to complete questionnaires which specifically focused on the perceived value and contribution of the cluster and study circle meetings. The questionnaires were distributed during the residential session when teacher learners had come together to write the first semester examinations. The approach helped to increase the return rate of the questionnaires which was 78 percent. The cluster leaders were purposely selected to include both men and women who could contribute freely in discussions as key informants in separate humanities and science combinations. There were eight participants in each focus group discussion which raised the number of teacher learner participants to ninety four. This number was considered representative enough considering that a combination of questionnaire and interview on the same target population ensures richness in the depth and quality of information drawn for purposes of research. In addition, information was also sourced from 16 Field Supervisors through questionnaires and independent interviews were conducted with two key managers who coordinate activities which the college plans for the teacher learners throughout the programme.

The open questions in both interviews and questionnaires were analysed qualitatively while closed questions in the questionnaires were quantitatively analysed with the help of the SPSS computer software package. The two analytical approaches increased accountability of the wealth of the data collected in the study. This in fact increased the triangulation of the information which guaranteed the study's depth in dealing with the problem which otherwise would have been missed had it been that only a single method of data collection and analysis was used. Tables have been used

in reporting quantitative data from questionnaires which used closed questions for consistent responses of various respondents. The analysis made comparison between groups possible as each could be tabulated with its frequencies and percentages.

Creation of Environments that Sustain Learning

The study circle and cluster meetings provide learners with consistent contacts with supervisors and fellow learners which create safe learning environments in which they can ask questions, reveal their uncertainties and explore new dimensions in their studies (O'Rourke, 2003). Both students and field supervisors indicated that study circle and cluster meetings fulfilled different but complementary purposes in support of student learning. The former mostly facilitated academic discussions with groups of different subject combinations and the latter allowed for participation of all teacher learners in the affairs of the cluster members and also dealt with administrative matters led by a field supervisor. The field supervisors promoted less formal interactions with teacher learners through attendance and spot checking on study circle meetings. The study circles are conducted more frequently, at least every fortnight while cluster meetings are conducted once a month.

It was reported that in study circles, teachers tended to meet in groups of subject combinations to conduct academic discussions. The agenda was guided by content topics and assignments prescribed for each semester. From the interviews with programme managers and cluster leaders it was also observed that teacher learners also used the interactions with each other to share resources and skills in teaching various topics of the syllabuses they handled in their classes. It was clear from the responses that the study circles were seen as anchors of the programme to which success and sustainability of learners could be attributed. By putting emphasis on subject combinations the study circles were conducted with a specific agenda that helped learners to discuss problems that were specific to their subjects. This ensured a detailed analysis of the academic problem and possible solutions that could be collectively realized. It is not surprising that all participants felt that the study circle meetings greatly helped in clarifying issues which otherwise would have been difficult for individual learners. Table 1 below provides a summary of how teacher learners felt about the usefulness of the study circle meetings in supporting their learning in the ODL programme:

Table 1 Teacher Learner Perceptions of Usefulness of Study Circle Meetings

Reasons for maintaining study circle Meetings in ODL	Percent
Helping each other in assignments	92
Helping each other in clarifying difficult areas	78
Helping each other to improve the teaching of difficult areas	11.5
Others	44.9

For the students, the major reason for maintaining study circles was to enable them to help each other in assignments. This reasoning is consistent with their response to the question of how they individually benefited from the study circles. The majority of the participants attributed their success or high performance to the support they received from their peers in the study circles. These results do confirm what other authors have indicated about the value of discussion groups in ODL programmes such as providing opportunities for tutoring (Moon, Leach, & Stevens, 2005; Maroba, 2004; Thuteotsile, T, 2004); reducing isolation which undermines efforts to study in rural settings (Craig, Kraft, du Plessis, 1998); and promoting the spirit of sharing learning resources which are often scarce (Jenkins, 2004). Resource sharing has been evident in the manner in which teacher learners of the same subject combinations cite similar references in assignments.

In the category of ‘others’ in Table 1 were a variety of reasons which also matched with some unique responses regarding the benefits of the programme to individuals. Among the reasons were welfare matters which demonstrated opportunities for socialization. Apart from reducing isolation and affording the individual members a sense of belonging to a group, the study circles offered opportunities for developing trust among group members which became the basis of sharing resources among them. This was important in a country where resource scarcity has been exacerbated by unwarranted competition among teachers. It is common to see neighbouring schools reporting serious disparity in terms of human and material resources despite being funded from the same budget. Another important factor which demonstrates lessons from study circle groupings is the opportunity for students to express or learn organizational skills. This was particularly noticeable when the College coordinated

field activities through cluster leaders in the absence of hired field supervisors for two years.

The teacher learners also saw the attendance of the cluster meetings obligatory as means of sustaining oneself in the programme. For both meetings there were none who reported that they never attend the meetings. The majority indicated they frequently attended the meetings as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Frequency of Teacher Learner Attendance of Cluster and Study Circle Meeting

Frequency of Attendance	Study Circle	Cluster
Most Frequently	46.2	46.2
Often	44.9	41.
Rarely	9.0	12.8
Never	0.0	0.0

It was clear that teacher learners felt obliged to attend both meetings. The results were not specific to gender or subject combinations as all respondents showed that they attended the meetings regularly. The few that selected ‘rarely’ as a response also indicated distance or lack of partners with similar combinations as their reasons for not attending the meetings frequently. The teacher learners’ responses regarding their attendance of the meetings were consistent with the expectations of the programme managers who felt that the attendance was obligatory to all learners. The managers emphasized that the meetings were the only reason for which the teacher learners could be allowed some time off from their schools to attend to academic work of their course. The college management had from the onset of the programmes negotiated with the Ministry of Education officials to allow the learners time off on a school day once a week or fortnightly for the purpose of such meetings. The managers also felt that the support which the teacher learners gave to each other through the meetings heavily accounted for the high success rates and minimal drop out rates registered in the programme.

Although not many students who completed questionnaires saw the improvement of teaching as either one of the reasons and/or the benefit of the study circle meetings, it

remains an important factor for the teacher programme delivered through the ODL mode. An upgrading programme for teachers would fail to enhance quality improvement if it only focused on feeding a teacher with additional content without regard to how the teacher would improve the practice of teaching in their classrooms. Apart from understanding difficult areas covered in the course materials, teacher learners in the study had the immediate problem of teaching as though they were already qualified because the major drive for them to enroll into the programme was to get the respect of a qualified teacher in their schools. It is, therefore, not surprising that some of them reported how the study circle discussions helped them to improve their teaching. This was consistent with the observation that adult learners typically want to be able to link what they are learning with their life and work (O'Rourke, 2003). It was, therefore, inevitable for the teacher learners to expect the programme to offer them opportunities to practice teaching in the areas of their professional interests. The group discussions could at times be diverted to how to teach a topic that had direct relevance to the syllabus they were teaching. This was a necessary extension of the intellectual discussions to accommodate the professional needs of the most inquisitive teacher learners who saw opportunities for immediate application of what they learnt. In such a way, the discussions in the study circles usually moved from mere intellectual interactions to professional enrichment through the horizontal process of consolidating individual's support to ensure cross fertilization of ideas on resources and techniques of teaching that were relevant to specific topics. One teacher learner expressed the experience as follows:

Before I joined the programme, I experienced difficulties teaching some topics of the Biology syllabus. Through discussions and sharing of ideas and examples in our study circle, I have gained some competence to teach the topics.

Regarding cluster meetings, it was generally observed that the majority of the respondents regarded them as administrative. The meetings were held in the presence of a field supervisor to share information about the programme and to accord learners an opportunity to submit assignments or receive communication from the college including marked assignments. Table 3 below provides a summary of what teacher learners and supervisors felt were the contributions of cluster meetings to the whole learner-support system of the programme.

Table 3: Summary of How Cluster Meetings Provided Learner Support

Contributions of Cluster Meetings to Learner Support	Responses per group of participants in percentage	
	Field Supervisors	Teacher Learners
Facilitating important communication	62	88
Facilitating submission and receipt of assignments	78	51
Discussing welfare matters concerning the cluster	47	25
Other	9	7.7

The results generally demonstrate agreement between learners and field supervisors on the factors which were first articulated in the interviews with cluster leaders and managers of the programme. The cluster meetings generally satisfied the administrative functions of the programme under the leadership of field supervisors. It is also clear from the findings of the study that both cluster and study circle meetings provided learning environments to individuals as well groups of learners. Regardless of sex and subject combinations, cluster meetings became important forums for the exchange of ideas and resources that were necessary in the programme. The findings were consistent with the original plans of the support system of the programme in the field phase.

Challenges of the Cluster and Study Circle Meetings as Support Mechanisms

Both learners and managers including field supervisors cited distance from the school to the venue of cluster or study circle meetings as a hindrance. This was particularly a problem because learners use their own money to travel and attend such meetings. In a number of cases modifications on the schedules have been made either to hold study circles fortnightly as opposed to weekly or rotate venues of the meetings to balance up the financial demands of the meetings to different learners. In areas where adequate learners of the same subject combinations have been present in one school or same locality, they have established their own study circle to cut down on transport costs. The supervisors have also been advised to ensure rotation of cluster meeting venues to benefit all learners. The whole system has been difficult to monitor because of

distances to be covered and the financial limitations which the programmes has usually experienced. The programme managers have depended on reports from field supervisors and in their absence, cluster leaders have also reported on student attendance or absenteeism. In some instances, learners have followed up on those who fail to attend the meetings as a way of encouraging them.

Further to the problem of distances was the challenge of cash to buy food and refreshments for members whose meetings usually go beyond lunch time. Both teacher learners and field supervisors reported this as a serious problem, especially that the project which started the programme used to make provisions for refreshments every time students and supervisors met in cluster or study circle meetings. The college management has on several occasions been petitioned for consideration of this aspect. The programme managers share the view of the college management that such a service would not be possible in view of budgetary constraints. In addition, it would be difficult to monitor accountability of such a service even if money were available to provide it. The concern is indeed genuine because it was observed that some groups make monthly contributions towards purchase of drinks during the meetings. There were also indications that some teacher learners have been pressing their school heads to contribute towards transport and refreshments expenses during the meetings. There seemed to be no easy solution to the problem considering that the programme continues to expand. The college may have to take such expenses as additional learner contributions when reviewing the fees of the programme rather consider them as hidden costs of the training.

Another challenge is the fact that some learners who do not attend the meetings regularly have been found using the arrangement to abscond from work to perform personal errands. This behaviour has made some head teachers to become difficult in granting permissions to teacher learners under their charge. Despite the communication which the ministry of education made regarding the arrangement, the college management has been asked to clarify the arrangements from time to time for new heads and those who just do not trust teacher learners who frequently request for time off. The demands of the head teachers are not extra-ordinary in the context of serious teacher shortages experienced by some rural schools. Although the meetings have ensured success of the learners in one way or the other, it is necessary for the

management of the programme to seriously monitor the meetings to curb abuse. It should be necessary to ensure that the meetings are carefully integrated into the resource demands of the schools so that the support system does not further deprive the schools of the teacher as is the case in full time programmes (UNESCO, 2002). There is also a need for the programme managers to deliberately regulate cluster and study circle meetings in such a way that they meaningfully meet the needs of all learners with their agendas made available to school administrators for collective support.

The current set up of study circle meetings favours subject combination groupings based on year of study. It was observed that the arrangement further isolated the learners of minority subjects who usually could not have anybody of their combination and year in the same locality. There was evidence that the teacher learners continued to meet and discuss within same cohorts and not across years. The system, therefore, denied those who had already gone through the course an opportunity to help those who come after them. This explains why some students felt isolated even when they had seniors of the same combinations in their cluster.

From the managers' point of view the most serious challenge of cluster and study circle meetings is the enforcement of learner dependence on group work. It was observed that weak learners had mostly depended on contributions of others when responding to individual assignments. College lecturers have been bothered with similarities in some responses of students from the same study circles which signs of a serious offence of plagiarism. Apart from demonstrating the learner abuse of study groups, the problem also challenges the way lecturers come up with assessment tasks which might have made it difficult for the learners to produce unique responses on the basis of individual creativity. When students exhaustively discuss factual questions it will be to the advantage of all to copy the points raised during discussion groups. While factual presentations would be expected to be similar, learners get distinguished when they try to apply or provide examples and illustrations that demonstrate unique interactions with the material that has been fully understood. It could be necessary for the college lecturers to deal with the problem by improving on assessment tasks so that more challenging responses are expected.

Conclusion

Both cluster and study circles provide an opportunity for sustaining learners in the programme. This is particularly important in a country with serious resource limitations where learners do not have access to a computer, telephone and/or electricity connection and supply to their homes in addition to a poor postal connection (Jenkins, 2004). The print materials that the learners receive upon enrolling into the programme remain the most precious information which must be fully understood in order for them to make progress in the programme. Therefore, the groups in the study circles have been used to make the maximum benefits out of the course of study. The meetings have accorded teacher learners opportunities to understand the course work and improve their pedagogical skills to do their teaching assignments better. While the meetings reduced learner's isolation, they also increased their motivations to stay on the programme and successfully complete the training.

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