


Chapter 8

Reimagining Self-Directed Learning for Social Justice: Curriculum Delivery in Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) for Rural South African Students

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ABSTRACT

This study reviews literature to reimagine self-directed learning (SDL) within Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) for rural South African students, using a social justice lens. Drawing on academic sources and policy reports, it explores theoretical, pedagogical, and structural aspects shaping SDL in marginalised communities. The review examines intersections of access, equity, cultural relevance, and autonomy, highlighting barriers such as digital divides, poverty, and rigid curricula. Thematic analysis reveals the need for transformative frameworks incorporating participatory design, culturally responsive pedagogy, and fair tech access. It reconceptualises SDL as a socially embedded process requiring systemic alignment with justice-focused education. Policy, instructional design, and institutional implications are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

With the transformation of higher education in recent decades, we see Open Distance e-Learning (ODEL) emerging in prominence as a major access model, especially in sub-Saharan African countries (Akintolu & Letseka, 2023). Being institutionalised in the spirit of openness, flexibility, and learner-centredness, it was an answer to socio-economic changes, infrastructural hindrances, and heightened demands for education by non-traditional learners. Institutions, such as the University of South Africa (Unisa), are incidences of this evolution, as they are establishing distance platforms to serve a geographically dispersed student population (Mbatha & Naidoo, 2010).

ODEL settings, while holding promise, continue to face difficulties on pedagogical and institutional fronts. Systemic challenges impeding educational outcomes include inadequate information technology infrastructure, scarce academic support, and insufficient preparation of the learners (Mashile, Fynn & Matoane, 2020). This is further aggravated by digital divides, as evidenced by disparities in access, connectivity, and digital literacy, particularly in rural areas (Ajani, 2025), where the very equity the ODEL aims to uphold is at risk.

Another dimension of difficulty exists in transaction distance, as defined by Moore (1997), which refers to the psychological and communicative gap between the learner and the instructor in an online environment. The notion retains a central view in explaining learner isolation, autonomy, and engagement. Giosso et al. (2009) and Kara (2021), among others, emphasise that reducing transactional distance is crucial for improving educational outcomes, which in turn requires strategic teaching and technological interventions. The global COVID-19 pandemic thus made visible these vulnerabilities, accelerating hybrid learning mode on one hand, while exposing infrastructural weaknesses and pedagogical incapacities on the other (Bashir et al., 2021; Kaisara & Bwalya, 2021).

Within this complex educational terrain, the e-tutors are essential in facilitating learning and support systems. A practical e-tutoring approach goes beyond and should motivate the learner, provide scaffolding where necessary, and exercise pastoral care (Goold, Coldwell, & Craig, 2010). Accordingly, Maré and Mutezo (2021) and Enwereji et al. (2024) reaffirmed the need for robust professional development programmes that would enhance e-tutors' competencies in pedagogy and technology. Equally important are student support services—academic counselling, peer mentoring, and psychosocial support—which are considered to be the basis of learner success (Lumadi, 2021; Majaule, 2023; Sembiring, 2020).

An interesting point is that OERs further democratise learning by offering free materials that can be adapted for use (Ives & Pringle, 2013). In contrast, Akintolu and Letseka (2023) opined that the limitation of their impact stems from insuffi-

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