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Chapter 2

Collaborating Partnerships: A Project–Based Legitimizing Strategy amongst East African E–Learning Providers

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the phenomenon of e-learning in East Africa. The classic grounded theory methodology was used to carry out the study. Through multiple encounters with 24 e-learning providers, the investigation revealed legitimizing of e-learning projects to be a significant issue for these providers. Developing collaborating partnerships was a key strategy used by the providers to legitimize e-learning projects. The study identified two types of collaborating partnerships: Asymmetrical and Reciprocal. These findings are positioned within literature to highlight the contribution that this paper makes to the discourse on e-learning projects in developing countries.

INTRODUCTION

E-learning is variously defined as the use of information and communication technologies or ICTs (e.g. computers, the Internet and mobile devices) to facilitate teaching and learning (Cowie & Sakui, 2013; Mayer, 2003). Naidu (2006) draws a distinction between four types of e-learning – individualised learning that is online (i.e. Internet-based); individualised learning that is offline (e.g. materials delivered via CD or DVD); group learning that is asynchronous (e.g. via email lists), and group learning that is synchronous (e.g. video conferencing). E-learning in this paper encompasses all these different types.

Demonstrating the legitimacy of e-learning has been a relevant and persistent concern to researchers and practitioners alike for several years (Kilby, 2001; Lisewski & Joyce, 2003; Yick et al., 2005). This concern has arisen as a result of several factors. For example, predictions were made at the turn of the century, suggesting that e-learning would substantially reduce, if not replace, face-to-face learn-

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ing environments (Carliner, 2002; Njenga & Fourie, 2010). This prediction has not been fulfilled, with many e-learning projects drastically scaled down or abandoned (Carliner & Shanks, 2007). There has furthermore been an unusually high rate of failure associated with e-learning projects, which has led to the credibility of these projects being questioned (Keegan et al., 2007). It has also been widely assumed that e-learning results in better learner performance than traditional learning modes (Piccoli et al., 2001). Research evidence has not always supported this assumption (Piccoli et al., 2001; Njenga & Fourie, 2010), highlighting that performance is not necessarily improved simply by changing the media of instruction (Mayer, 2003). Qualifications achieved through purely online learning programmes have faced questions of legitimacy relative to qualifications achieved through traditional face to face learning or blended learning (Adam & DeFleur, 2006; Ndume et al., 2008). Finally, the e-learning profession is at a fairly nascent stage of development, and has therefore faced challenges of “academic legitimacy” within higher educational institutions (Lisewski & Joyce, 2003; Yick et al., 2005).

The context of this study is the developing countries of East Africa. In this context, it has been argued that African universities are not fully prepared to participate in the evolution of ICT for teaching and learning due to a myriad of problems, including lack of legitimacy of some online learning programmes, low investment in ICT infrastructure and the high cost of connectivity and bandwidth (Chacha, 2009; Lwoga, 2012; Sife et al. 2007). Gunga and Ricketts (2007) suggest that collaborative public-private partnerships between stakeholders such as telecommunications providers, e-learning vendors, government and educators may help overcome some of these challenges, as does Lwoga (2012). Collaborative partnerships are touted too by Clarke (2003) as a means of sharing resources and good practice. An example of such a partnership is provided by Sife et al. (2007) who report on an e-learning partnership between universities in Africa and Europe. Not much research in the East African context has focused on the issue of how e-learning projects are legitimized. This paper therefore reports on a legitimizing strategy used by e-learning providers working in East Africa.

The findings reported here arose from a broader grounded theory study whose purpose was to inductively develop a theory to explain the core concerns of e-learning providers working in East Africa, and how these concerns are resolved. The focus on e-learning providers was justified, as much e-learning research has presented either a student or institutional view. An inductive approach was deemed most appropriate, in particular the classic grounded theory methodology (CGTM) (Glaser & Holton, 2004). By following the CGTM principles and procedures, legitimizing of e-learning projects emerged as one of the key concerns for e-learning providers working in East Africa.

This paper is laid out as follows - after this introduction, the CGTM is explained in further detail, since it was foundational to how the research was carried out. Following this, existing literature on the key concepts of the paper are presented. The findings from the empirical data are then presented and discussed in comparison to literature before the paper is concluded.

CLASSIC GROUNDED THEORY METHODOLOGY

In this study we chose to use classic grounded theory methodology (CGTM) by Glaser and Strauss (1967). CGTM has been elaborated and refined by Glaser over the years (Glaser 1978, 1998, 2006). Lowe (1996, p3) describes CGTM as being designed to “*develop and integrate a set of ideas and hypotheses in an integrated theory that accounts for behaviour in any substantive area*”.

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