

Assessing contextual best fitting ePedagogies for communal Zambia

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Abstract

The study sought to establish pedagogical methods commonly used in the Zambian educational system today. It also identified which, among these options, were most preferred by learners and teachers. The enquiry was a thematic qualitative study that elicited thoughts, feelings, emotions, preferences and motivations that influenced participant choices. The study has a sample of 28 HEA accredited HEIs drawn from a total population of 63. An inclusion and exclusion criteria was used to arrive at this sample. At each site, at least two purposively chosen respondents were interviewed exploiting open ended questions in an interview guide. The study found that most participants (i.e. 59%) preferred the well-established in-person F2F traditional pedagogical approaches, 30 % preferred blended while 8% opted for exclusive online learning. A further minute group (3%) were uncertain. The study concludes that the majority (i.e. 59%) still favour traditional pedagogical approaches while another portion (i.e. 30%) are open to blended approaches. Only a small section (8%) welcome exclusive online learning. The study recommends that more intentional stakeholder sensitization, investment into digital Ed Technologies, enhanced digital pedagogical skills capacity building and ensuring that state of the art technologies are in place.

Keywords: ePedagogy, Andragogy, Interaction, Hybrid, Blended Learning, Face to Face (F2F), Digital Skills, Capacity building

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Introduction

In life, what and how we learn is critical (Pelletier *et al.*, 2023; Aheto & Cronje 2022; Czerniewicz *et al.*, 2019). It, in many senses, shapes what people become, their competencies and acquired skills (Hockridge 2015; Hockridge & Bower 2023). If the learning or teaching approaches, experiences, processes or methods (e.g. in the formal setting) are not ambiently pleasant, chances are that the learner or instructor will keep as far away from that route as possible (Czerniewicz *et al.*, 2019; Gallagher 2019). In worst case scenarios, learners unknowingly wrongly associate the good they should have learnt with the bad experiences. It is therefore important that the right appropriately fitting pedagogy is employed in whatever setting. ‘Pedagogy’ is a word that has been variously used (or defined) but carries the connotation of a teacher guiding or instructing a minor (i.e. children) (Tomei & Douglas 2019; The Hanover Research 2009; Watson 2008; Tinto 1975). That is its simplest basic meaning. Sources like the Merriam Webster (2023 online) simply describe it as ‘the art or science of teaching’. Applied to education, pedagogy has to do with the instructing of learners by the teacher. Pedagogy has not been static but evolving over the years and therefore not cast in concrete (Perris & Mohee 2020; Czerniewicz *et al.*, 2019). With the advent of eLearning, newer approaches have become necessary, given the altered dynamics consistently coming to the fore (Sakulprasertsri 2022; Mpungose 2020; Pelletier *et al.*, 2022; Stoltenkamp & Kasuto 2009). This has been need in motion but became especially pronounced after the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic disruption (Mpungose 2020; Czerniewicz *et al.*, 2019). At the time, learners needed to continue receiving instruction but how could this be? The best route was eLearning and proved helpful (OECD 2022; Smith 2022; Dhawan 2020). However, with time, it became evident that in less resourced contexts like Zambia, users struggled to appreciate, capture and efficiently learn in cyber space (Kayombo & Mwiinga 2021; Mukwena & Sinkala 2020). One of the problem areas was the pedagogy used, which obviously mirrored the extantly established traditional approaches whereas, for eLearning, several approaches and styles to pedagogy have recently been evolving. These include a mixture of styles and approaches like: 1. Asynchronous or Synchronous (approach) 2. Blended (or hybrid) learning¹ (style: online or not (Fadde & Vu 2014)) 3. Hyflex (Pelletier *et al.*, 2023) 4. Block release 5. Lecture (teacher centred) 6. interactive (including joint projects to foster learning and community) 7. Flipped class (student centred) 8. Content centred etc. and 9. Learning centred, among others. Traditional approaches often require in person contact, manual hard copy, travelling, etc., but eLearning offers an alternative. Despite increased access student to quality HEIs and the much touted promise of eLearning, best teaching approaches have remained an area of concern (U.S Department of Education 2024; Baum & McPherson 2019; Protopsaltis & Baum 2019; Fluegge 2021; Fain 2019; Bettinger & Loeb 2017). Researchers remain

¹ Field experts like Laura Czerniewicz, Henry Trotter and Genevieve Haupt (2019: p 2) have defined blended learning as “the use of both online teaching and learning methods in conjunction with traditional face to face classroom or laboratory engagements (sometimes called ‘Hybrid learning’.”

divided about approaches or elements either compromised or enhanced in eLearning, one of them being formation (Hockeridge & Bower 2023). For instance, they ask how formation would be assured? Or how best relational type of professions would be served? These, and other challenges come to the fore (Hockeridge & Bower 2023; Fluegge 2021; Logan-Goyette *et al.*, 2021b; Hockeridge 2015; Kotoua *et al.*, 2015). This paper addresses some aspects of these questions and more. In this study, the word 'pedagogy' and 'andragogy' are used interchangeably¹ despite focusing on HEIs.

This study aimed at identifying prevalent pedagogical methods used in Zambia. It also established which, among available options, were preferred by study participants in Zambia's HEI ecosystem. The research is significant in that it highlights existing methods, proffers empirical evidence from the Zambian context and offers decision makers or course designers the needed facts as they embark on implementing any eLearning ecosystem.

This enquiry was undergirded by Tinto's 1975 student theory that discusses student drop out or integration in higher education. The theory posits that learners either integrate and fuse into a new learning environment to keep engaged unto completion. It also states that, if for some reason, learners fail to diffuse, integrate for whatever reason, including class environmental conditions, they are likely to withdraw, postpone and completely abandon studies altogether. Tinto (1975: 91, 92) says the following about integration:

"According to Durkheim (1961), suicide is more likely to occur when individuals are insufficiently integrated into the fabric of society. Specifically, the likelihood of suicide in society increases when two types of integration are lacking—namely, insufficient moral (value) integration and insufficient collective affiliation... One can reasonably expect, then, that social conditions affecting dropout from the social system of the college would resemble those resulting in suicide in the wider society namely, insufficient interactions with others in the college and insufficient congruency with the prevailing value patterns of college collectivity. Presumably, lack of integration into social system of the college will lead to low commitment to that social system and will increase the probability that individuals will decide to leave college and pursue alternative activities."

Evidently, this theory touches on pedagogy and environment created in the academic context whose climate may or may not be favourable to an individual.

Literature Review

Pedagogy is key in education (Czerniewicz *et al.*, 2019). It lies at the very heart of knowledge and skills impartation. Right pedagogy makes all the difference and thus must be approached, treated or managed with utmost care reason because pedagogy both opens or closes doors to future opportunities for learners (Pelletier *et al.*, 2023; Fluegge 2021; Cercone 2008). If learners (and instructors) are not exposed to good sound and appropriate pedagogy, their attitude to learning may negatively be impacted for the rest of their lives or part thereof (Orakei 2020; Czerniewicz *et al.*, 2019; Mukosa & Mweemba 2019; Park & Cho 2009). Time is a precious resource worth harnessing. That said, the word 'pedagogy' is an ancient Greek² word carrying the idea of 'leading' or teaching a child (Moore *et al.*, 2007). According to some sources³, the word is a combination of two words 'paidos' for child and 'agogos' for leader which when combined connote 'leading a child'. In that case, strictly speaking 'pedagogy' refers to teaching infants (or young ones) needing coaching, educating, instructing, teaching or schooling about a whole range of things necessary for life. This word inherently assumes that there is a younger inexperienced learner on the one hand and a relatively well versed, skilled competent and able teaching adult on the other, that instructs, teaches or disseminates information which the former (i.e. infant) probably does not know. Further the word 'pedagogy' at times carries the idea of instruction using a formal, defined and structured curriculum, although it may equally include other varied unwritten activities like 'on the job' mentorship. This implies that different kinds and styles of pedagogy exist (Top Hat online glossary 2023). According to the Merriam Webster⁴ dictionary (online 2023), pedagogy in education, is defined as "the art,

¹ Although strictly, a distinction can be made.

² The word pedagogy is derived from the Greek word "paidagogos," a word used by the Greeks over 4,000 years ago (i.e. circa 3000 BC). See a further definitions and descriptions of the word at: <https://tophat.com/glossary/p/pedagogy/>, accessed on 7th November, 2023.

³ E.g. from the Top Hat online glossary site accessible at: <https://tophat.com/glossary/p/pedagogy/>, accessed on 7th November, 2023.

⁴ Merriam Webster online accessible at:

https://www.google.com/search?q=pedagogy+meaning+in+education&rlz=1C1GCEU_enZM945ZM945&oq=Pedagogy&gs_lcp=EgZjaHJvbWUqBwgFEAAgAQyBwgAEAAgAQyBwgBEAAgAQyBwgCEC4YgAQyBwgDEAAgAQyBwgEAAgAQyBwgFEAAgAQyBwgGEAAgAQyBwgHEAAgAQyBwgIEAAgAQyBwgIEAAgAQyBwgATSAQoxMjg3OGowajE1qAIA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8, Viewed on 7th November, 2023.

science, or profession of teaching." This broad definition covers various aspects of teaching, and there are many moving parts to pedagogy that include teaching styles, feedback, and assessment. The term pedagogy essentially boils down to the study of different teaching methods. When we begin to talk about adult learning, the word 'pedagogy' correctly used becomes 'andragogy' that Knowles (1984) and other field experts developed. Andragogy is a form of pedagogical approach except targeted at older mature learners where the dynamics change to accommodate the hind knowledge that learners come with to the table. According to Knowles (1984), at least four principles of andragogy exist as listed at length: 1. Involve (adult) learners at the planning stage of their course/training 2. Adult learners already have some knowledge as they come to learn, bear that in mind 3. Craft a curriculum that is relevantly applicable to adult needs to resolve life's issues 4. Problem centred approaches to learning resonates well with adult learners. Said differently, andragogy is the teaching of mature learners (especially in HEIs) bearing in mind that they are more independent, already know something and unlike children, wish to drive their own learning or be involved there in. They already know what they exactly need but all they require is guidance and willing to figure out the rest beyond that. This implies that teaching mature learners should bear this fact in mind, adjust teaching style to include appropriate activities like problem solving, mutual respect, interactions, showing learners to the right knowledge pond and letting them explore for themselves, among others (Seed 2019). For instance, Kearsley (2010), argues that problem centred approaches to learning work best for mature adult folk because they are most likely looking for answers to some issue (Sichone 2023). Andragogic elements have been spelt out by Cercone (2008) who states that adults want to be in the driving seat, have an idea where they are headed, know what they desire and how that training will help them solve immediate life problems otherwise interest and attention significantly diminishes (Sichone 2023; Cercone 2008). Different studies have been conducted around the world relating to andragogy (e.g. Knowles 1984), most of which are within the traditional learning settings like face to face (F2F) (Hockridge & Bower 2023). Other studies have attempted to explore other appropriate approaches, given the dynamism in the industry. While the traditionally trained teachers dismiss novel attempts at modifying teaching and learning, others have opened up to newer approaches, albeit with varying degrees of optimism. Bahula (2015), for instance, raises helpful questions around theological education pedagogy in the light of eLearning. He further questions how the Silicon Valley driven approaches will affect learning, formation, relational careers or related aspects. Fluegge (2021) is even more explicit, almost dismissing virtual learning as ineffective and actually potentially harmful to theological education. We make no mention of practical hands-on type of careers like Engineering, sufficient research has been conducted around this component by other experts. In short, it is a mixed bag although not completely rejecting emerging technology driven trends (Stoltenkamp & Kasuto 2009). In recent years, especially just before and after the Covid-19 pandemic, this study has been extended to other educational areas including online education (Hockridge & Bower 2023). This is for a good reason, as eLearning garners clout, there is need to minimize anything that hinders eLearning adoption (Aheto & Cronje 2018; Bettinger & Loeb 2017; Berk 2009). One of these key areas is ePedagogy, how teaching and learning is conducted in cyber space (Park & Kim 2020; Czerniewicz *et al.*, 2019). Various field experts discuss pedagogy from different perspectives and worth reviewing to glean insights. Among these include Brown (2016), Darko-Adjei (2019), Espiritu and Budhrani (2019), Aheto and Cronje (2022), Himoonga and Phiri (2020), Logan-Goyette *et al.*, (2021a), Muleya *et al.* (2019), Oliver (2018), Omwenga and Rodrigues (2006), among others. That said, it needs to be said that digital mediated learning is relatively novel in several less resourced contexts like Zambia. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, it was found that many Zambians (in this study sample) did not think eLearning even possible, let alone known (Sichone 2023). Since the pandemic however, the picture has significantly changed (Sichone 2023; Pelletier *et al.*, 2023; Mpungose 2020). One of the areas that learners and teachers in the study sample repeatedly mentioned as an area of concern in pedagogy. This particular study explored and addressed this gap. Accordingly, a larger study was conducted in 2023 to establish which pedagogical approaches HEI ecosystem participants in Zambia was preferred. The results section highlights what was found.

Methodology and Data

Methodology describes how the study was executed and why a given approach was chosen. This study was primarily a thematic qualitative study that elicited thoughts, opinion and inner motivations why participants took the positions they did. This was the best approach to get the required data, given the nature of study. Qualitative studies are used if a researcher wishes to get in-depth information about phenomena and meaning behind what is. Several researchers including Creswell (2012), Mason (2002), Patton (2002), Berg (2009) and Mason 2010 argue that qualitative studies yield rich data and need not have a large sample. As such, this study had a sample of 28 institutions out a total population of 63 HEA accredited HEIs (HEA 2020). An inclusion and exclusion criteria was used to determine the sample size. If a site did not approve the data collection request, it was excluded from the sample. To mitigate bias and enrich data, at least two individuals were purposively chosen at every site, interviewed whose responses were recorded, stored, transcribed sorted, categorized, themed, analysed and interpreted. Findings are presented in the ensuing section.

Results and Discussion

Students were asked to state what form of approach to learning they preferred among several options. The majority (59%) preferred traditional in-person F2F approaches (i.e. interactive, in person physical contact classes etc.), 30% chose Blended, 8% inclined towards exclusive online learning while a minority (3%) were unsure or desired other ways. Figure 1 summarizes what was found.

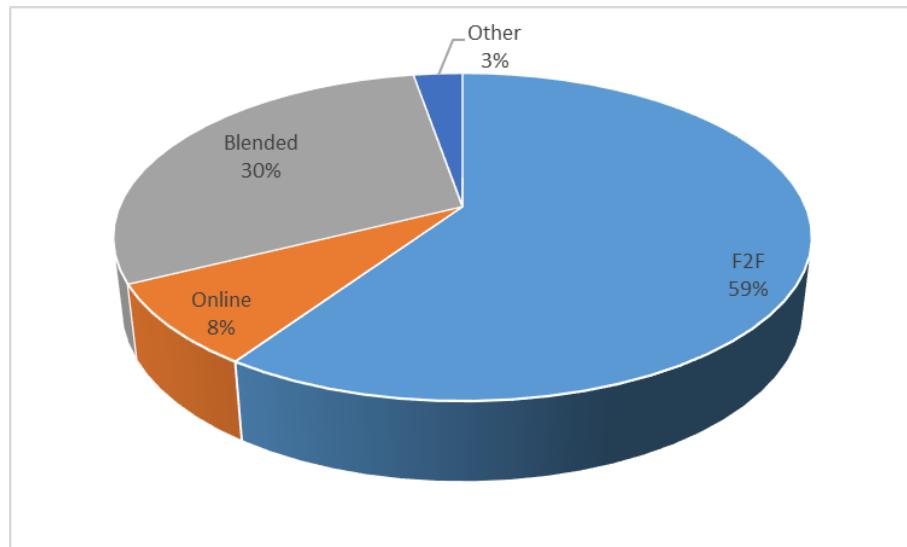


Figure 1: Preferred modes of learning and pedagogical approach.

Source: Research Data (2023)

The style and approach to teaching is important. It likely affects response of students and whether they are likely to resiliently persevere in their studies or not. If a generally preferred pedagogical approach is ignored or not pursued, there is a likely hood that learners may be discouraged, disengage or not have a pleasing experience during their study time. On the other hand, if an appropriate, correct fitting approach to learning is exploited, there is a likely hood that students will be motivated to complete their studies, given the fewer hurdles along the way (Timbi-Sisalima *et al.*, 2022; Espiritu & Budhrani 2019; Suhail & Mugisa, E 2007). A good pedagogical approach, especially an andragogy that fits adult learners in HEIs is likely to enable success. Further, with this knowledge, planners can better scheme how to design their work or know where to concentrate. In this study findings, it was evident that most learners (and teachers) prefer the traditional face to face mode of teaching and learning because of immediate and interactive feedback parties receive. The study also revealed that 30% preferred the blended approach that included aspects of in- person contact lessons as well as use of educational technology (Ed Tech). Ed Tech is composed of digital technologies that are used in learning using mediated approach and may include the LMS, SIS, computers, mobile devices, servers etc. The blended approach grants 'the best of both worlds' of virtual and in person physical learning/teaching. Blended is also better likely to tackle the formation concerns that Hockridge and Bower (2023) have highlighted in the literature review section. It was interesting to observe that only 8% of respondents preferred exclusive online learning as an approach given the hind cultural experience (Espiritu & Budhrani 2019). This figure may be higher than what it probably was before the pandemic (Covid-19) struck, suggesting an upward shift. Overall, the data suggests that traditional modes of teaching and learning remain most dominantly popular though blended approach is a strong contender, even more so, after Covid-19 (Fadde & Vu 2014). Exposure has a way of demystifying things, removing wrong perceptions, altering attitudes and premising future decisions on facts and first hand practical experience. Participants were asked to explain why they preferred F2F over other modes and the common responses included immediate feedback, an authentic feel to it, a real sense of community and a sense of seriousness attached to well tried and tested modes. Instructors felt that with F2F, the teacher was in better control of the class, could easily monitor class attendance, sense gaps, respond to needs and class engagement was thought to be better than in virtual spaces. One instructor gave an example to the effect that many times, he was unsure if students were even present in virtual class or had just logged in and vanished. He also opined that in his view, mental concept processing and concentration among students appeared lower than in formal physical class. Another instructor opined that in physical class, all he needed were hand written notes, walk into class, deliver content, answer questions interactively and go off. The dynamics were different in cyber learning and teaching, even demanding more time and resources, he claimed (Timbi-Sisalima *et al.*, 2022; Czerniewicz *et al.*,

2019; Tomei & Douglas 2019; Tomei 2006). The teacher felt he was in better control of the class time as well. As for blended learning, both students and faculty members felt the approach had a place in that it had components of both spheres integrated that could be manipulated to achieve good outcomes. There was not too much technological stuff to deal with and enabled the accessing of content, uploading of data, enabled asynchronous class engagement or real time class, contingent on the mode chosen by the institution. Fadde and Vu (2014) make a distinction between Blended online learning and blended learning. While the latter involves online real time learning, the latter may not necessarily involve real time timed virtual learning. Further, Pelletier *et al.* (2023) add the Hyflex dynamic where virtual learning is varied based on timing, availability, user preferences, learner flexibility away from the rigid predictable course time table arrangement. As systems and experiences improve, probably with the advent of AI (e.g. Chat GPT5 or such), it is expected that the Blended and online preferences may grow wider and bigger. Although F2F may never be dethroned, as Orakci (2020), Yamada (2020), Baum and McPherson (2019), Protopsaltis and Baum (2019), Aheto and Cronje (2018), Ghavifekr *et al.* (2014), Fadde and Vu (2014) or Park and Choi (2009) have argued, its unfettered dominance certainly is certainly being affected.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study yielded a number of issues worth considering in planning and designing eLearning. The study concludes that pedagogy (andragogy for mature learners) is absolutely critical to learning needing careful attention. The study also concludes that although pedagogy, in principle is the same, the dynamics change in eLearning. A specific fitting ePedagogy is essential. Additionally, the study concludes that although the majority still prefer F2F, an increasing portion opt for the blended approach to learning given its benefits from both worlds (i.e. F2F and virtual learning). This implies that more intentional aggressive on-going sensitization strategies needed to change attitudes towards eLearning if eLearning is to take off and be sustained.

The study recommends the following:

1. Course designers for eLearning need to pay attention to altered dynamics. A 'cut and paste' approach to pedagogy mirroring traditional F2F approaches will not do. Additionally, user experience needs to be prioritized so that it is as pleasant as possible for users from inception.
2. Government and institutions have to intentionally target aggressive ongoing sensitizations, exposure of stakeholders to Ed Tech so that users have a realistic view of eLearning as an authentic alternative mode of learning and teaching. This allays and removes misconceptions, wrong notions.
3. Institutions must deliberately invest more in digital eLearning enabling technology (infrastructure), culture nurturing for continued improvement of eLearning

Declaration of Competing Interests

This study was free of any potential conflicts as it was an independent work.

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