Transformative Practices in ODeL: Advancing Higher Education Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

The landscape of education is experiencing significant transformation with the rise of open distance and e-learning (ODeL), which offers unprecedented opportunities to redefine teaching and learning practices. This study aims to explore transformative practices in ODeL environments, focusing on their influence on educational outcomes and pedagogical approaches across diverse contexts and disciplines. Central to this investigation is the role of technology-mediated environments in facilitating transformative practices. Through the integration of digital tools, interactive multimedia, and collaborative platforms, educators can design dynamic and engaging learning experiences tailored to the needs of diverse learners. Employing a narrative review methodology, the study synthesises empirical evidence, case studies, and theoretical frameworks from existing literature to highlight the transformative potential of ODeL practices. The review suggests that the flexibility and accessibility of ODeL modalities empower students to engage with content at their convenience, thereby fostering a personalised and student-centred approach to educational access and success. We also found that strategies such as inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, and personalised pathways leverage ODeL platforms to create inclusive and participatory experiences. These approaches, grounded in Nancy Fraser's social justice theory, could enhance critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills while addressing educational inequalities especially in the context of South Africa. The study thus contributes to the ongoing discourse on advancing practices in the use of technology to enhance educational

outcomes in an increasingly digital and unequal society. Continuous professional development for educators ensures sustainability and adaptability in advancing these practices.

Keywords: open distance and e-learning (ODeL); personalised education; inclusive pedagogy; transformative practices; teaching and learning

Introduction and Background to the Problem

The integration of technology into open distance and e-learning (ODeL) in higher education has emerged as a transformative force in South Africa and beyond, where accessibility and inclusivity are critical challenges. As digital platforms offer flexibility and scalability, they promise to bridge the gap between traditional education and diverse learner needs. However, despite this potential, South Africa faces significant obstacles in fully leveraging technology for equitable educational transformation. According to Devkota (2021), inadequate digital infrastructure, especially in rural areas, restricts access to online learning resources, perpetuating existing educational inequalities. Moreover, disparities in digital literacy among students and educators hinder effective engagement with ODeL platforms (Czerniewicz, Trotter, and Haupt 2019). As a result, the reliance on synchronous teaching methods exacerbates these challenges, as many students lack reliable internet connectivity to participate in real-time learning.

The concept of ODeL according to Msekelwa (2023) encompasses a wide range of educational modalities, including online courses, virtual classrooms, multimedia resources, and open educational resources, all of which leverage digital technologies to enhance teaching and learning outcomes. This approach to education has gained increasing prominence in recent years, driven by the growing demand for flexible and accessible learning options, the expansion of digital infrastructure, and the recognition of the potential of technology to democratise access to education and promote lifelong learning. At the heart of ODeL lies the notion of transformative practices, innovative pedagogical approaches, strategies, and interventions that have the potential to revolutionise teaching and learning processes and outcomes (Judijanto et al. 2022).

The educational environment has as a result undergone a profound transformation fuelled by advancements in digital technology and evolving pedagogical approaches (Miller and Ives 2023). One notable development in this regard is the emergence of ODeL as a versatile and dynamic platform for delivering educational content and facilitating learning experiences beyond the confines of traditional classroom settings. As highlighted by Mbhiza (2021), ODeL represents a paradigm shift, offering unprecedented opportunities for students to access quality instruction, resources, and support remotely. However, the complexity of education, aggravated by challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, requires adaptable and effective practices to ensure meaningful teaching and learning outcomes globally, including in South Africa.

While technology-mediated learning has been positioned as a solution to South Africa's higher education challenges, its implementation has revealed systemic shortcomings that undermine its transformative potential. For instance, Miller and Ives (2023) emphasise that ODeL platforms often neglect the socio-economic realities of many students, such as limited access to affordable devices and data. Furthermore, the absence of culturally relevant and context-specific digital content alienates many learners, reducing engagement and retention (Quillinan et al. 2019). These persistent barriers highlight the need for targeted interventions that prioritise equitable access, localised content, and capacity building for both educators and learners. In addressing these challenging issues, we argue that it is essential to harness the full potential of technology in ODeL, ensuring that it becomes a catalyst for meaningful and inclusive higher education transformation in South Africa.

Transformative practices in ODeL are thus characterised by their ability to foster deeper engagement, critical thinking, collaboration, and empowerment among students, ultimately leading to profound shifts in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours (Colomer et al. 2020). Despite its growing popularity, gaps remain in understanding and advancing these transformative practices to maximise their efficacy and impact on pedagogy. This research thus seeks to explore transformative practices in ODeL environments, focusing on their influence on educational outcomes and pedagogical approaches across diverse contexts and disciplines. By delving into the theoretical underpinnings of this narrative review, the main research question would be:

- How do transformative practices in ODeL environments influence educational outcomes and pedagogical approaches across diverse contexts and disciplines?

The Role of Technology-Mediated Environments in Facilitating Transformative Practices

The role of technology-mediated environments in facilitating transformative practices in ODeL has garnered significant attention in academic discourse. These environments leverage digital tools to redefine pedagogical approaches, promoting inclusive, personalised, and student-centred learning experiences. The integration of learning management systems, video conferencing platforms, and interactive multimedia enables educators to create dynamic and engaging content that aligns with diverse learner needs (Devkota 2021). Such platforms not only enhance accessibility but also foster collaboration and knowledge sharing, which are essential for transformative education. For instance, asynchronous discussion forums and online peer assessments empower students to actively engage in their learning processes, encouraging critical thinking and self-reflection (Siemens 2005). However, we argue that the success of these practices heavily depends on equitable access to technology and digital literacy among both educators and students.

Despite their potential, technology-mediated environments in ODeL face persistent challenges that hinder their transformative impact, particularly in resource-constrained settings. In South Africa for instance, the digital divide remains a critical barrier, with many students unable to access reliable internet connectivity or affordable devices (Czerniewicz, Trotter, and Haupt 2019). This inequity limits participation and undermines the principles of social justice as articulated by Nancy Fraser (2008), which emphasise three dimensions of justice: redistribution, recognition, and representation. Redistributive justice calls for systemic efforts to provide resources equitably, ensuring that all students can benefit from technological advancements. Similarly, recognition of diverse learner identities and cultural contexts is crucial in designing technology-mediated content that resonates with students and fosters meaningful engagement (Chiramba and Maringe 2020).

The role of adaptive learning technologies in facilitating personalised learning pathways exemplifies the transformative potential of technology-mediated environments. These tools, powered by artificial intelligence (AI) and data analytics, modify content to individual learners' strengths, weaknesses, and preferences, thereby addressing the diverse needs of ODeL students (Rane, Choudhary, and Rane 2024). This personalised approach not only enhances learning outcomes but also aligns with participatory justice, which seeks to empower students by involving them in decisions about their educational journeys. Conversely, implementing such advanced technologies requires significant investment in infrastructure and training, posing challenges for higher education institutions in low-resource settings (Devkota 2021).

Furthermore, the use of technology to facilitate collaborative learning has shown promising social engagement, reducing the isolation often associated with ODeL. Virtual classrooms, gamified learning activities, and collaborative tools like shared workspaces enable students to interact and work together, thereby building a sense of community and enhancing their social learning experiences (Herrington, Reeves, and Oliver 2014). Yet, as Fraser's (2008) framework suggests, these practices must also address systemic inequalities to ensure that all students can participate meaningfully. The realisation of this potential requires addressing systemic barriers, ensuring equitable access, and designing contextually relevant and culturally sensitive content. Failure to do so risks reinforcing existing disparities rather than bridging them.

Theoretical Framework

The selected theoretical framework for this study is the theory of social justice, which provides a valuable lens for examining and enhancing transformative practices in ODeL. Social justice theory underscores the importance of equity, inclusion, and empowerment in education, particularly for marginalised and disadvantaged groups (Madonsela and Lourens 2021). At its foundation, the theory seeks to ensure fairness, equality, and the protection of human rights, making it a critical tool for addressing systemic inequalities in higher education. Synthesising perspectives from various researchers, this study adopts Fraser's (2008) conceptualisation of social justice, which

revolves around three main issues: recognition, redistribution, and participation. Recognition involves respecting and valuing diverse cultural and social identities; redistribution focuses on the equitable allocation of resources; and participation emphasises giving all individuals a voice and agency in educational processes. Applied to ODeL, this framework provides a robust foundation for understanding and addressing the challenges of equity and inclusion in digitally mediated learning environments.

By leveraging social justice principles, technology-mediated learning in ODeL can be used to bridge systemic inequalities and promote fair access to educational opportunities. Keddie (2020) highlights how technology, when purposefully integrated, can facilitate participatory and inclusive practices. For instance, the use of digital tools to foster collaborative learning environments or personalised learning pathways aligns with Fraser's framework by ensuring that diverse learner needs are met. Equity, as Ainscow (2020) asserts, is a fundamental human right, and transformative practices in ODeL must strive to provide all learners with a fair opportunity to realise their potential. These practices involve fostering environments where students critically reflect on social injustices, challenge dominant narratives, and actively contribute to positive change within their communities. Pedagogical strategies such as problem-based learning or service-learning projects enable students to engage with real-world issues, applying their skills and knowledge to advocate for social transformation.

Incorporating Fraser's social justice theory into this study enriches the understanding of transformative practices in ODeL by providing a structured framework to assess and address educational inequalities. This theoretical lens highlights the intersection of pedagogy, technology, and equity, by ensuring that the exploration of transformative practices is grounded in principles that prioritise fairness and inclusion. In selecting this theory, we believe that it would enable the study to identify the systemic barriers that hinder educational outcomes as well as propose actionable strategies for their mitigation. By examining how recognition, redistribution, and participation can be operationalised in ODeL settings, we anticipate that this framework contributes to a nuanced understanding of the ways in which technology-mediated environments can be designed to enhance transformative educational experiences. Ultimately, the adoption of this framework ensures that the study not only explores the pedagogical and technological dimensions of ODeL but also aligns these dimensions with broader social justice goals.

Methodology

The study employs a narrative review methodology that integrates empirical evidence, case studies, and theoretical frameworks from existing literature between 2010 to 2024. The narrative review approach, according to Rocco and Plakhotnik (2009), allows for a comprehensive synthesis of various sources of information, enabling a holistic understanding of the research topic. Unlike systematic reviews, narrative reviews are not bound by a rigid protocol and offer flexibility in their design, which is shaped by the author's objectives and goals (Wong et al. 2013). As a result, literature within the

above time frame was randomly picked on the basis that they align with the study. Currently, Eriksson (2023) asserts that there is no universally agreed-upon structure for narrative reviews. Eriksson further explains that the IMRAD format (introduction, methods, results, and discussion) is often considered a suitable framework. The structure of a narrative review typically adheres to the style and conventions of the target journal, which vary from one journal to the other. As noted by Paré et al. (2025), narrative reviews are commonly used to examine ongoing debates, evaluate previous research on a specific topic, identify gaps in existing knowledge, and explore recent developments or interventions.

The following steps were taken in this study. An initial research scope and objective were clearly defined to ensure that the review would address the specific research question and area of interest. This step involved identifying key themes and concepts relevant to the topic to guide the subsequent literature search. This was followed by a systematic search of the literature conducted using multiple databases, including PubMed, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. Search terms were derived from the research objectives and included combinations of keywords and phrases related to the topic.

Studies were then selected based on their relevance, quality, and contribution to the understanding of the research topic. Empirical studies, case studies, and theoretical frameworks were prioritised. The selection process involved a thorough review of abstracts and full texts to confirm their alignment with the research objective (Peters et al. 2020). Thereafter, data from the selected studies were extracted systematically, focusing on key findings, methodologies, and theoretical contributions. The extracted data were then categorised into themes to facilitate a structured analysis. Moreover, the narrative synthesis involving integrating the extracted data to form a cohesive understanding of the research topic was followed. Empirical evidence was then used to substantiate case studies and theoretical frameworks, providing a multi-dimensional perspective. Finally, the findings of the narrative review were reported in a structured manner, summarising the integrated evidence, case studies, and theoretical frameworks.

Theorisation of Transformative Practices and Their Role in Educational Outcomes

Transformative practices in ODeL are increasingly recognised as critical in advancing educational outcomes by fostering equitable access, inclusivity, and engagement. Fraser's (2008) social justice theory, with its principles of recognition, redistribution, and participation, provides a robust framework for theorising these practices, addressing inequalities, and maximising their impact on learning outcomes.

The concept of recognition underscores the importance of acknowledging diverse learner identities and needs in educational environments. In ODeL, transformative practices such as culturally relevant pedagogy and inclusive curriculum design aim to validate and reflect the experiences of diverse learners (Quillinan et al. 2019). According

to Naz, Ali, and Aftab (2024), this recognition is pivotal in creating a sense of belonging among marginalised learners, thereby enhancing motivation and engagement. Similarly, Thelma et al. (2024) highlight the importance of designing learning experiences that align with the cultural and social contexts of learners, ensuring that content resonates and fosters meaningful connections.

Redistribution, another pillar of Fraser's (2008) theory, focuses on equitable access to resources, which is fundamental to ODeL's transformative potential. Matsieli and Mutula (2024) argue that redistribution addresses systemic barriers to education by leveraging technology to provide flexible and cost-effective learning solutions. For instance, open educational resources and asynchronous learning models enable students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access quality education without the constraints of time and location (Larson and Murray 2008). Redistribution also involves providing technological infrastructure and support, such as subsidised internet access and low-tech alternatives, to ensure that all learners, particularly those in resource-constrained settings, can participate fully in ODeL environments (Devkota 2021).

Also, Fraser's (2008) principle of participation is reflected in transformative practices that actively involve learners in the learning process. Inquiry-based learning and project-based learning, for example, encourage students to co-create knowledge, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Colomer et al. 2020). Participation also extends to the use of collaborative tools, such as discussion forums and group projects, which enable learners to share diverse perspectives and develop interpersonal skills. Herrington, Reeves, and Oliver (2014) argue that such participatory approaches bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application, preparing students for professional environments and societal engagement.

Transformative practices in ODeL also emphasise authentic assessments, which align learning outcomes with practical skills. Authentic assessments, such as case studies and simulations, enable students to apply theoretical knowledge to complex, real-life scenarios, fostering deeper learning and critical reflection (Cheng et al. 2016). By integrating such assessments, educators are able to ensure that students are not only knowledgeable but also equipped to adapt and contribute effectively to dynamic professional and social contexts. We therefore propose that continuous professional development for educators and investments in digital infrastructure are essential to mitigate the challenges of transformative practices and ensure the sustainability of transformative practices.

This section provides a valuable lens for understanding and advancing transformative practices in ODeL by prioritising recognition, redistribution, and participation. These practices not only enhance educational outcomes but also contribute to a more equitable and inclusive higher education landscape. This narrative review reveals several transformative practices that have the potential to advance teaching and learning frontiers in ODeL. These, among others, include the following.

Learner-Centred Pedagogy

According to Robinson and Persky (2020), self-directed learning entails the learner establishing goals, deciding on methods for measuring progress, organising activities and their sequence, setting a timeline, identifying necessary resources, and seeking feedback. They, however, warn that when introducing this approach to novices, care must be taken to provide proper scaffolding and structure to help them develop the soft skills required for effective self-directed learning. Implementing this teaching method in a classroom presents some crucial challenges for both students and educators. Yet, ODeL provides opportunities for personalised and self-directed learning experiences, allowing students to pursue their interests, set their own pace, and engage in collaborative and experiential learning activities.

In relation to the social justice theory, Ainscow (2020) warns that while ODeL can offer access to students who might otherwise be excluded from higher education due to the cost of digital technology, it also has the potential to create new forms of inequality. As such, we support the narrative that transformative practices in ODeL must be aimed to ensure that all students, regardless of their socio-economic background, geographic location, or physical abilities, have equal opportunities to access high-quality educational resources and experiences (Graham and Nevarez 2017). This may involve providing alternative modes of delivery, such as mobile learning or audio-based content, to accommodate students with limited access to internet connectivity or digital devices. This way, the transformation would be based on one of three factors of social justice as identified by Fraser—the need for participation (Keddie 2020), which goes beyond the issue of fairness and equality.

Use of Interactive Technologies

Incorporating interactive technologies into ODeL courses significantly enhances student engagement, facilitates deeper understanding, and caters to diverse learning styles and preferences. The use of multimedia, such as videos, animations, and audio recordings, provides varied and rich content delivery methods that can capture students' attention and maintain their interest more effectively than traditional text-based materials alone (Mayer 2020).

Simulations offer an interactive environment where students can experiment with concepts and see real-time consequences of their actions, which promotes active learning and helps in the practical application of theoretical knowledge. For instance, interactive technologies, including discussion forums, quizzes, and virtual classrooms, support collaborative learning and allow students to interact with peers and instructors, thereby creating a more immersive and engaging educational experience (Larson, Leung, and Mullane 2017). These technologies also enable personalised learning paths, catering to the unique learning styles and paces of individual students. Providing instant feedback and adaptive learning experiences helps identify and address students' learning gaps more effectively (Anderson 2017). Thus, the integration of multimedia

and interactive technologies in ODeL courses not only enriches the learning experience but also ensures that it is inclusive and adaptable to the needs of a diverse student population in what Fraser has described as the need for participation, recognition, and redistribution where applicable (Chiramba and Maringe 2020).

Collaborative Learning Communities

ODeL platforms play a significant role in facilitating the creation of online learning communities. ODeL platforms offer various tools such as discussion forums, chat rooms, and social media integrations that allow students to interact and connect with their peers through equal opportunities to participate and be recognised. This connectivity fosters a sense of community and belonging, which is, according to Anderson (2017), crucial for student engagement and retention. Through these platforms, students can share their ideas in collaborative environments such as virtual classrooms and discussion boards. These spaces encourage students to present their perspectives and engage in critical thinking by considering the diverse viewpoints of their peers (Hibbert 2013) by means of recognition and equal participation.

One of the key benefits of ODeL platforms is the ability to collaborate on projects regardless of geographical barriers, hence the need for equal opportunities. This emphasis on tools such as collaborative documents, project management software, and video conferencing makes it possible for students to work together effectively in real-time or asynchronously (Larson, Leung, and Mullane 2017). This collaboration enhances problem-solving skills and helps students learn to work in team settings, which is valuable in their professional lives. ODeL platforms also facilitate continuous feedback and support. Instructors can provide timely feedback through online assessments and grading tools, while students can support each other through peer reviews and collaborative discussions. This immediate feedback loop is essential for effective learning and improvement (Mbati and Mphahlele 2024) as well as the redistribution of teaching and learning resources towards enhancing ODeL classrooms.

Real-World Applications

Integrating real-world scenarios into open distance and e-learning courses represents a transformative practice that enhances the relevance and applicability of higher education. By enabling students to apply theoretical knowledge to real-life situations, such approaches foster critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills essential for professional success (Herrington, Reeves, and Oliver 2014). However, barriers such as unequal access and lack of participation present challenges to equitable learning experiences. Addressing these challenges is vital to ensuring fairness and inclusivity, particularly in diverse ODeL contexts. Authentic tasks not only prepare students for the complexities of the workplace but also promote continuous learning and adaptability, aligning with the demands of an ever-evolving global environment (Cheng et al. 2016).

Applying social justice frameworks, such as those proposed by Chiramba and Maringe (2020), highlights the importance of equitable access to educational resources and opportunities. Fraser's (2008) principles of redistribution, recognition, and representation emphasise the need to dismantle barriers to participation in real-world applications and assessments, ensuring students from diverse backgrounds have equal opportunities to succeed. By embedding these transformative practices in higher education, institutions can promote social equity, enhance student engagement, and bridge the gap between theoretical learning and practical application. This shift not only enriches learning outcomes but also empowers students to adapt to professional challenges and contribute meaningfully to society.

Continuous Professional Development for Educators

Continuous professional development for educators in ODeL has proved to be essential for maintaining high-quality teaching and learning experiences. By offering ongoing training and support in ODeL pedagogy, instructional design, and technology integration, educators are better equipped to implement transformative practices that foster deeper student engagement, critical thinking, and holistic development (Karunanayaka and Naidu 2020). Such professional development initiatives are vital in advancing the frontiers of teaching and learning within the ODeL framework, ensuring that educators remain adept at utilising the latest educational technologies and methodologies to enhance student outcomes.

Moreover, by offering continuous professional development opportunities, educators can significantly improve their skills and competencies in ODeL pedagogy and technology integration (Hennessy, Haßler, and Hofmann 2015). These development programmes could include workshops, webinars, and collaborative learning sessions designed to the latest advancements in educational technology and instructional strategies through active participation. As a result, educators would be better equipped to design and deliver effective, engaging, and inclusive online courses. This ongoing training in our opinion is to ensure that educators remain current with emerging trends and best practices, ultimately enhancing the overall quality of education and student outcomes in the ODeL environment.

Recommendations

As one part of the recommendation of this study, we believe that institutions offering ODeL could embed Fraser's (2008) principles of recognition, redistribution, and participation into their pedagogical frameworks. This involves designing culturally relevant and inclusive curricula that reflect the diverse identities and needs of learners. Special attention should be given to marginalised groups to ensure they feel acknowledged and valued in the learning process, fostering a sense of belonging and engagement. For this to be achieved, higher education institutions could prioritise equitable access to educational resources and technological infrastructure. Strategies such as subsidised internet access, the provision of low-cost or low-tech alternatives,

and investment in open educational resources can significantly improve access for students in resource-constrained settings. Thus, policymakers and stakeholders must collaborate to bridge the digital divide and ensure all students can participate fully in ODeL environments.

Also, the adoption of interactive technologies, including multimedia content, virtual classrooms, and collaborative platforms, is critical for fostering active student participation. These tools could be utilised to create immersive and engaging learning experiences that encourage students to co-create knowledge, develop problem-solving skills, and critically engage with diverse perspectives. To achieve this, we recommend continuous professional development programmes to enhance educators' skills in ODeL pedagogy, instructional design, and technology integration. Such training initiatives must focus on equipping educators with the competencies required to design transformative learning experiences that align with social justice principles.

Conclusions

This study underscores the pivotal role of transformative practices in advancing educational outcomes within ODeL environments. Guided by Fraser's (2008) social justice theory, this study highlights the critical importance of recognition, redistribution, and participation in fostering equitable access, inclusivity, and student engagement. By addressing systemic inequalities and leveraging technology-mediated environments, ODeL institutions have the potential to create empowering and transformative educational experiences.

Implementing these practices requires a multifaceted approach, including the adoption of learner-centred pedagogies, equitable resource allocation, the use of interactive technologies, and continuous professional development for educators. Subsequently, embedding authentic assessments ensures that students are equipped with the skills and knowledge to thrive in dynamic professional and social contexts. By integrating these strategies, ODeL can transcend traditional educational paradigms, contributing to a more equitable and inclusive higher education landscape that empowers students to drive meaningful change in society.

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