

## Chapter 10:

# Facilitator Support Services in Distance Education: Benefits, Developments and Disparities

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## Definition of facilitator support and its importance in the distance learning environment

According to IGI Global (2021), faculty support can be described as the strategies an institution employs to provide faculty members with resources, skills, knowledge, and needed infrastructure to facilitate viable learning outcomes for students enrolled in a distance learning program. Further, facilitator support can be described as resources provided to faculty to facilitate instruction and learning for students enrolled in given programmes. Several factors contribute to the significance of facilitator support in an institution offering distance learning as a mode of study. According to Sümer and Yüner (2021), faculty support is essential in an institution with distance learning since it enables the institution to seamlessly realise the envisaged learning outcomes for each course in the online learning environment.

Further, faculty support plays a pragmatic role in implementing distance learning education policies. Policy implementation of distance learning becomes a reality, and reducing policy gaps can then be realised. This way, institutions can improve policies regarding distance learning to improve the quality of distance learning (Amirault 2012; Maguire 2009). Besides, faculty support in the distance learning environment promotes the development of high-quality content for learners. With compensation for instructional content developed, faculty members will have intrinsic motivation to develop high-quality content since the institution is cognisant of their intellectual property.

It is worth noting that continuous faculty support through training equips faculty members with the highly sought skills for course facilitation in the online learning environment. Specifically,

these pieces of training should be done online, and institutions should support faculty members to enrol in diverse courses from globally recognised institutions. Suppose a facilitator is contracted to enlighten university online faculty on skills needed: in this case the facilitator should be an online learning expert from a renowned university besides the ones needing the training. This way, the faculty members in an institution of distance learning have the unique opportunity of benchmarking with best practices globally. The result is an immense improvement in the quality of course facilitation in distance learning that meets global standards (University of Louisiana 2022; Roberts 2022).

Consequently, faculty support plays a pragmatic role in selecting the key competent additional staff needed to facilitate online courses in an institution effectively. The faculty in distance learning are well-placed to define the roles and responsibilities of additional staff in the distance learning centre while avoiding role ambiguity and replication of the roles by the various officers (Roberts 2022; Hasanoglu and Zeynilli 2022). Faculty members in distance learning will appreciate the roles of the instructional designer, content developer, and learner support officers. This way, operations in the distance learning environment will be seamless with fewer hitches. Customer satisfaction will then be a priority of the institution offering distance learning. Other roles of faculty support in a distance learning institution include testing the viability of new pedagogical approaches in the realm of online and distance learning, propelling high-quality scholarly discussions with learners during the facilitation of courses by deepening the learner involvement in online courses, and promoting social interactions within the learning platform with themselves and the learners (Rienties 2022).

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### **Current trends of providing facilitator support in the online learning environment**

Currently, many institutions have attempted to provide faculty members with the required resources to make distance learning run seamlessly. One of the most common ways that institutions have done this is by training their faculty for distance learning courses before official engagement in facilitating online courses. Some of the key areas that faculty members for distance learning are being trained in include the creation of courses, registration of learners for the courses, preparation of examination schedules, utilisation of open e-learning resources, continuous assessment tests, and management of interactions between learners and their course facilitators on the online learning platform (Bozkurt and Sharma 2020; Higher Education Council of Turkey 2021). Other areas that

faculty members in distance learning are being trained in include the execution of formative and summative assessments on the online learning platform, since these assessments differ from the traditional face-to-face assessments, management of the welfare of the learners, and management of announcements in the distance learning environment.

Management of integrity in the distance learning environment has gone a notch higher. The course facilitators carry out the noble responsibility of reminding their learners to follow the academic code of conduct and the importance of carrying out assigned tasks within the required timelines. If the learners do not follow the requirements, the faculty members can hold students accountable for their conduct within the learning environment. Institutions should also include this control in the specific contracts for students and online facilitators, with every tenet spelled out clearly. Additionally, academic integrity has been added to the top of the Blackboard or Moodle switchboard (Higher Education Council of Turkey 2021; Maatuk et al. 2021). This keeps the learners informed on what is expected from them by the course facilitators. This approach has helped facilitators maintain a cordial working relationship with their learners in distance learning environments. Timelines are clearly defined; thus, online learners plan their time accordingly and execute tasks as expected without friction between them and their lecturers. Examinations in the distance learning environment are handled with deep integrity. For instance, the Lockdown app and the use of personal laptops with cameras have made examiners handle the distance learning examinations with integrity. The Lockdown app is an android software that locks devices and pages remotely. Several institutions of higher learning have used this app to promote integrity in their examinations.

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Currently, faculty support has been improved to incorporate administrative and technical support, as well as social support that faculty members may desire. Although experienced faculty members in distance learning do not have much difficulty creating course content, some faculty members face slight difficulties in the assessment areas. Hence, these faculty members need academic support. Additionally, faculty members need technical support in creating live broadcasts and how to properly manage their time during the execution of the courses, since online courses remain strictly time-bound and strict adherence to approved course schedules is expected. Another area where faculty members are currently being supported is the creation of highly interactive course materials that promote critical and creative thinking among their learners (Ouma and Nkuyubwatsi 2019). To sum it up, faculty members receive continuous support from the administrative and technical staff in the online learning centres of their respective institutions. This way, quality has been prioritised in distance learning centres in institutions.

Another way faculty support is being executed currently is through engaging adequate and relevant staff members within the distance learning centres of institutions. Currently, most distance learning institutions have instructional designers, content development officers, learner support officers, technical support officers, and even system administrators for effective management of the e-learning platforms like Moodle and Blackboard. With adequate staffing of these relevant staff members in distance learning environments, quality distance learning can occur in the institutions (Higher Education Council of Turkey 2020; IGI Global 2021). This approach toward faculty support has played a crucial role in eradicating the fallacy of online learning.

Consequently, online pedagogy has been able to continuously evolve regarding technological upgrades. One of the ways is encouraging active learner participation through maintaining an instructional tone that is informative, relaxed, and engaging. Besides, the online pedagogue can ensure that they use appropriate humour and avoid ridicule so that each learner feels accommodated. On the other hand, the online pedagogue should ensure that they possess enough questions for the learners and avoid using the facilitator-centred method at all times (Butola 2021). The questions are meant to encourage the learner to engage in interactive sessions and explore more regarding the subject in question. In this regard, the course facilitator should use active questioning (Barros et al. 2021). This shows that the course facilitators have mastery of their learners regarding their interests, preferred activities, and motivators. This way, the facilitator is more objective about how best to guide the online instructional sessions by creating more personalised online learning materials for the students. Nevertheless, the facilitator must create a good online learning environment by maximising available resources as provided by their institution while ensuring that the needs of the learners are met optimally.

Noteworthy in current times, is that online course facilitators have embraced more collaborative teaching and learning methods. This means that the facilitator engages the learners more in group tasks and encourages peer reviews of completed tasks to ensure that the students share their viewpoints and demonstrate the mastered skills. Online pedagogues need to ensure that the students are divided into small, manageable groups to maximise the benefits of collaborative learning. Additionally, the information provided by the online pedagogue should ensure that instructional information is released to the students in small manageable chunks. Thus, the learners will process the information given gradually and sequentially in an elaborate manner before proceeding to the next chunk of information. Further, the online pedagogue uses quizzes, question polls, and gated content to ensure that the students have understood one educational chunk of information before proceeding to the next (Todd et al. 2021; Geange et al. 2021). From these reviewed studies, it is

evident that online faculty need training on collaborative training so that the intended benefits of the same can be realised.

There should be a link between e-learning content and real-life situations. This way, the students can appreciate and relate what they have learned to real-life experiences. Moreover, they can appreciate that their knowledge is useful. This way, they take their courses more seriously since what they learn is extremely pragmatic to their real-life situations. Another current-day strategy used by online pedagogues is clarity of rules in the online class to the learners from the onset—for example, the etiquette expected of them in the online classroom environment. Learners know the expected outcomes and work to ensure that the classroom demeanour aligns with their expected behaviour while undertaking the course. This aligns the overall learning experience with the expected outcomes of the course. It is of great importance to also ensure that the facilitator keeps engaging the learners in questions through discussion forums, question polls, and peer reviews (Galacio 2021; Saiyad et al. 2021). This approach aids the learning process to become engaging and the learners to develop content mastery at every level.

For effective online sessions, the Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) work collaboratively with the instructional designers and the e-content developers to ensure that the course materials have clear instructions, and the course materials have formative activities that are clear and elaborate enough to capture the content of the course. The formative activities should provide clear feedback to learners so that the feedback serves as a supplementary guide and aligns with the learning outcomes (Chatterjee and Correia 2020). Another modern method of provision of facilitator support is the provision of reflection on the previous courses, which in a nutshell is clarity in terms of stating the welcoming instructions, review of clear feedback to evaluate the presence of any pressure points from the learners, any hitches in terms of their access to instructions, as well as an assessment as to whether the sources of information provided in the course were helpful to the learners enrolled in the course. The navigation links and especially the URL functionality (Uniform Resource Locator) need to be checked before the commencement of the course (Martin et al. 2020). Finally, the facilitator needs to get feedback on whether the learners felt welcome to their course as they pursued it.

Previously, there was a misconception that online learning courses did not need any preparation before facilitation. One of the misconceptions of online learning in the past included the use of materials from any sources to facilitate learning regardless of the source as long as they were discussing the relevant topic. Another misconception about the facilitation of online courses was that learners enrolled in the online courses do not need any support even as they continue to

pursue their courses. Further, most people assumed that learning in the online environment did not need supervision or a definition of quality (Hauer et al. 2021). However, the trend is different for trained distance learning facilitators since online courses require very thorough preparations before facilitating the course. Thus, online course facilitators should always have a communication plan showing them when and how to do certain guiding activities expected of them during the facilitation of the course (Blaschke and Bedenlier 2020). An example of a communication plan is depicted below.

**Table 1**

| Activity  | Details   |
|---|---|
| Pre-prepared introductory video                   | It is done at the very beginning of the module by the facilitator. It is usually a short video done at the beginning of the course to explain to the learners in brief about the course and the expected learning outcomes.   |
| Pre-prepared welcome message from the facilitator | This is done after the introductory video and is usually the official introduction forum of the facilitator to the enrolled learners. Usually, the facilitator leads the class in making the first post and welcomes individual students to the class as they post.   |
| Commencement of the course                        | This activity infers that the course facilitator provides an overview of the course and guides them on the different resources used during the course and the location of the same resources in the online learning platform. Besides, the facilitator guides the learners on how to seek help if they are stuck.   |
| Follow-up activities                              | This is done during and at the end of every online session. The facilitator may provide additional course materials to the learners and pose discussion questions to ensure that the enrolled learners are on track.  |
| Monitoring learner engagement                     | This is done every day. This activity ensures learners are constantly engaged at every point of the course, and knowledge retention is achieved. Some ways that the lecturer can assess learner engagement are by starting discussion logs and allowing learners to respond by posting their views. The facilitator only starts the discussion logs but allows the learners' voices to prevail. |
| Summing up discussion threads                     | All content posted by the facilitator seeking learners' responses in the form of discussion posts should be tallied up by the facilitator when all members have responded. Also, the facilitator should always advise the learners on standard etiquette and participate in modelling good behaviour. This activity is done frequently by the facilitator.                                      |
| Constant weekly reminders to learners             | The course facilitator should always remind the learners about the tasks, deadlines, readings, quizzes, activities, check logs, and even remind students via their emails if not engaged.   |

**Source:** Blaschke and Bedenlier 2020

Current-day, online course facilitators adopt a given model to guide them in the activities expected even as the course develops. An example of such a model that can guide facilitators on the activities is the Scaffolding Model espoused by Gilly Salmon. This model guides the facilitators in knowing and implementing what they should be doing as the course progresses over time (Acquaro 2020; Doo Bonk and Heo 2020). Considering this model, the online course facilitator finds out that the learners become intrinsically motivated and group work, including peer reviews, is ongoing. The learners are actively engaged in tasks the online course facilitators give them.

Distance learning facilitators have employed icebreakers in the past. However, it is worth mentioning that icebreakers should be items that can capture the learners' attention and arouse their interest in the subject (Aniuranti 2021; Wooten, Geerling, and Thomas 200). The main aim of integrating icebreakers into the course is to promote the fun element in class. Sometimes, the facilitator can have icebreakers of activities unrelated to the course, like favourite food, colours, and even holiday destinations (Martin, Wang, and Sadaf 2020; Kirby 2020). The responses by the students will trigger their active thinking, hence, their participation in the online classroom will be optimum.

Currently, the following is a checklist of the must-do activities by the facilitator before, during, and after completing the online classroom. Before the online class, the facilitator must ensure that he is familiar with the Learner Management System. The facilitator uses the Learner Management System for course delivery (Evans et al. 2020). The online course facilitators also need to ensure that they have already developed an online plan of activities that guide their online content delivery, ensure that all available resources and links work, and that their contact details are up-to-date so that the students can reach out to them in case of any emergencies they may encounter. Lastly, the facilitator should provide a welcome video for the learners to officially invite them to the course (Rehman and Fatma 2021). This will serve as a perfect orientation for learners in their new course; thus, learners feel accommodated in the course, enhancing customer satisfaction.

At the beginning of the course, the facilitator should ensure that all learners have successfully logged in, spell out the learning outcomes, and orient the learners on the expected etiquette during online classes. The facilitator should emphasise the importance of the interactions and sharing of experiences within the classroom to build a resilient online community of learners. It is worth noting that the facilitator should be a positive role model for the students. Additionally, the course should provide guidance and ensure continuous communication between the learners as the course progresses (Blum-Smith et al. 2021).

Facilitators are also expected to encourage the learners and continually seek feedback from



them. Monitoring learners' progress along with the provision of follow-up sessions and ensuring that all tasks are completed as expected is another way of providing facilitator support during the online sessions (Lohr et al. 2021). Upon completion of the online course, the online facilitator should ensure that the online learners are appreciated for their participation during the course, finish reviewing the learners' feedback, and provide recommendations on areas of improvement. Finally, the facilitator should self-reflect and self-evaluate (Erickson et al. 2021).

### Existing gaps in distance learning education: facilitator support services

Despite the integration of technology into twenty-first century learning, it is worth noting that there are still existing gaps concerning facilitator support. One of the major gaps in facilitator support exists in terms of the professional development levels of the course facilitator (Harun and Bynum 2018). In their findings, the authors observed that there is no clear framework guiding facilitators in online learning to support their learners. There is an evident gap between the ideal situation of what is expected of the facilitators and actual happenings in many distance learning institutions. For instance, it is expected that the facilitator should be able to use discussion forums, question polls, and question and answer sessions to promote interaction in the online learning environment. However, this has not always been the case due to some resource and human resource constraints. Infrastructural challenges have forced the facilitators to improvise other means of interacting with the students. Some facilitators use non-instructional platforms like the Zoom and WhatsApp platforms to offer academic guidance to students (Turgut and Aslan 2021). This indicates an existent gap since there is still a lack of clear alternative means of offering facilitator support if an institution faces limitations in terms of the infrastructural setup for distance learning.

On the other hand, there seems to be an existent gap in the professional skills of online course facilitators. As observed, most online course facilitators in distance learning institutions in Africa lack the pre-requisite skills to facilitate online learning. They tend to use methods suitable for the traditional face-to-face method to facilitate sessions for online courses. The result is that many facilitators do not maintain an interactive edge with their students because they simply upload the course material and desert the students enrolled in these courses. Such facilitators only turn up at the end of the semester to administer exams at the distance learning centres and platforms for courses they have not taught (Backfish et al. 2021).



Further, there are varied approaches of how many facilitators conduct their online learning lessons. In this regard, most learning institutions seem to have no clearly outlined policies to guide the facilitators effectively. On the flip side, if the policies do exist, there is a huge gap in how the policy guidelines are implemented and what facilitators practice (Turgut and Aslan 2021). Of concern is that some subject matter experts leave the designing process to instructional designers in the institution instead of adopting a collaborative approach towards developing the e-learning content for their courses (Ngubane-Mokiwa and Khoza 2021). As a result, the course content is designed without the expertise input, leaving the online learners in a disadvantaged position since the content is designed using basic strategies for instructional design and content development instead of a well-thought-out process (Yilman 2021). The foreseen gap is that disciplined expert guidelines are not utilised to the optimal level in the online learning environment.

In addition, most institutions still use the same traditional learning facilitators in the facilitation of online learning; yet the faculty members have not been trained in online course facilitation (Kamble et al. 2021). Consequently, the facilitators tend to be resistant and do not comply with the specific requirements for facilitating online courses. This creates a huge gap, which is a disadvantage to how online courses are being facilitated. Besides, some facilitators in dual-mode institutions are overwhelmed by the workload facilitated through the traditional teaching method. The overwhelmed facilitators tend to over-focus on the students enrolled in the traditional face-to-face mode of learning and instead abandon the ones enrolled in distance learning (Nikolopoulou et al. 2021). Thus, customer satisfaction for online learners is compromised, and sometimes the learners get a raw deal in knowledge acquisition in the courses they enrolled in.

Consequently, some faculty members in higher education allocated to facilitating online learning sessions have demonstrated their lack of readiness for adopting the modern technological methods of facilitating online courses. They tend to redirect learners to methods convenient to them as opposed to the best facilitator methods for online learning (Al-Moroof and Salloum 2021). As a result, the learners who are left with no option tend to comply with completing the course and scoring their grades. In contrast, the pedagogical techniques and requirements for online classroom management have been compromised. This means that students in distance learning feel their academic needs are ignored. In some cases, the lecturers are not held accountable for their actions.

Most facilitators do not use constructivist and observational methods during the instructional processes involving online learners (Fahmalatif, Purwanto, Siswanto, and Ardiyanto 2021). The intended purpose of incorporating the methods mentioned above is to promote increased

interaction between learners and their facilitators in the distance learning environment (Mbat and Minnar 2015). In their findings Mbat and Minnar (2015) observe that the use of the methods mentioned earlier was hindered by the large number of students enrolled in online learning classes. This infers that many students hindered the effective implementation of the constructivist and observational learning methods. The evident gap in this scenario is compromised quality of learning and a lack of clarity regarding the recommended facilitator-to-student ratio in the distance learning environment. Therefore, there is a need to make the recommendations for class size in distance learning known to course facilitators, as well as to the administrators of institutions offering distance learning. This helps to ensure that the facilitator is not overstretched regarding the number of learners they need to attend to at a given time in the distance learning realm.

Moreover, the current existing scenario is that there is a lack of individual mentorship sessions to guide students on how best to use technology for learning purposes. The course facilitators do not guide the individual students on how best to utilise the technology (Poland and Kumar 2021). This is prompted by the fact that the facilitators believe that most of the induction is to be done by the learner support officers in distance learning centres (Top et al. 2021). However, the extent to which the course facilitators should go with regards to mentorship and guidance of the students on using the platform for their academic issues is usually not specified. This has resulted in a huge gap in the type of mentorship the online students should get from their facilitators during orientation on the course.

On the issue of interaction: some facilitators do not give feedback to online learners regarding assessment. Feedback in this case refers to the facilitator's additional detailed comments and observation or sessions over the platform after reviewing an academic task. Most facilitators tend only to grade the students and stop at that level (Wu and Nia 2021). This leaves the online learners in a state of limbo since they cannot attest to whether they are progressing well or not during the general course progression. The course professor in the online learning environment must create sessions with students enrolled in their course to discuss the general course progression. Also, there is a need to develop well-stipulated guidelines on how to offer academic guidance to students enrolled in online courses. This will assist facilitators to ensure that they schedule time for such guidance and adhere to set guidelines in distance learning.

Noteworthy is the need to encourage course facilitators in distance learning to use current technology. Course facilitators can achieve this by training the course facilitators (educators) on how to use the recommended technology. In so doing, the course facilitators will optimally utilise the technological tools to achieve student satisfaction in the online learning environment. Thus, the

course facilitators will utilise the tools and even encourage student activities that can be done using the tools (Mbatl and Minaar 2018). However, in most distance learning institutions the instructional designers and content developers have the technical prowess to use the tools.

Furthermore, some course facilitators have not even endeavoured to master the operation of their institution's technological tools available in the learner management systems (Mbatl and Minaar 2018). This makes the subject matter expert overly dependent on the instructional designer to guide the instructional process. This depicts that there is a huge gap in terms of facilitator competency in institutions where distance learning is a mode of study.

With the emergence of numerous technological platforms which help facilitate online learning, there has been a huge deficit regarding how best to assist learners in distance learning to achieve the learning outcomes (Vlachopoulos and Makri 2021). Course facilitators need to note that the achievement of learning outcomes cannot only be measured by the grades attained by the students. Learning outcomes need to be also measured in terms of the learner's capability to carry out specific tasks set by their online pedagogues: tasks such as essay posting in discussion forums, students enrolled in the courses reviewing their colleagues' work in adherence to positive criticism rules, random assessments, and even giving students assignments that test for creativity (Kosmos 2021). This should promote deep knowledge, understanding, and internalisation of the concepts taught. In this regard, online education, whether for science or art-oriented courses, should be geared towards the adept promotion of learning content and concepts in a specific discipline (Kosmos 2021). Regarding this, therefore, there is a gap in the pedagogical approaches used in facilitating online learning for different disciplines.

There is also an evident gap in terms of the role of an online course facilitator in distance learning. Despite there being numerous subject matter experts on different disciplines, there is still a lack of clarity in terms of the fundamental role of an online facilitator since many facilitators utilise traditional face-to-face methods to facilitate learning in the online learning environment (Harper et al. 2018). For instance, the following are the ideal qualities to be possessed by an online course trainer: an excellent grasp of the expected learning outcomes for the respective courses, pay specific attention to the specific classroom activities and classroom assessments, maintain clarity in terms of inventory of tools that are needed for excellent facilitation of the course, provision of a clear work schedule for the course to be facilitated, and maintain a collaborative approach towards the facilitation of the course with the instructional designers, learner support officers, and even content developers (Sümer and Yüner 2021). This collaborative approach indicates that the facilitator maintains a clear picture of the envisaged presentation of the course (Bretag 2018; Ramírez-Montoya et al. 2021).

However, there is a gap between the ideal preparation routine mentioned and the actual practice in online course facilitation which needs to be urgently addressed. Besides, there has been an over-dependency on using wikis, blogs, discussion forums, and question and answer polls as strategies for creating interaction between course facilitators and their students in distance learning. This is an evident gap in the facilitation realm of online courses.

### **Suggested solutions in addressing the gaps as mentioned above in faculty support in institutions of distance learning**

In current times, evidenced by continuous innovation in technology and continuous reception of digital learning technology, various methods have been proposed as viable ways of increasing student interaction in online learning environments (Breteg et al. 2018). Among these strategies are the incorporation of social discussions in the course. Facilitators need to note that social discussions can be best described as the initial sessions where the student and the facilitator get to understand and know each other before the actual presentation of the course content (Blocher 2005). For instance, a facilitator would request the students to introduce themselves in a paragraph and then proceed in the next paragraph to discuss their motivation for pursuing the chosen course. This approach breaks the common tension between the learners and their course facilitators at the onset of the course. The resultant effect is increased student participation. Other ways of incorporating social discussions between the learners and their facilitators include greetings at the start of sessions and crafting effective announcements to students (Doyumgaç, Tanhan, and Kiyamaz 2021). This approach ensures that the facilitator's personality shines through and encourages students to participate in the learning process.

Another strategy for increasing student participation in an online course is the use of the check-and-reflect strategy of interaction in online learning. This specific strategy provides students with the opportunity to write introspectively about their experience, perception, and envisaged outcomes as they continue pursuing the online course. A good example of this strategy by the course facilitator is the incorporation of the bio-page. In the bio-page the course facilitator includes information he would comfortably share with his students regarding the course they are enrolled in and the common areas of application of the knowledge acquired from the course in real life (Muthugamage and Galhena 2021). The course lecturer can ask the students general questions about the course. One of the questions the facilitator could ask to prompt learners to give more

rapid responses is whether students think pursuing the course is going to be beneficial to them or not (University of Waterloo 2021; Ali et al. 2021), and the learners would post their responses.

Additionally, the course facilitator can go a notch higher by requesting the students to review each other's responses in a constructive way. This approach will promote student interaction in an online classroom and break the tension between the course facilitators and the learners.

Student interaction sessions are another modern way of promoting interactions in online classes. This type of interactive mode ensures that the students can mention additional details besides their names and other general details of interactions. This approach prompts the students to be creative and share more details about the same (University of Waterloo 2021; Ali et al. 2021). There are various ways the course facilitator can achieve this strategy. For instance, in a poetry class the facilitator can prompt the students to mention their favourite English poem and say more about it. This way, the students will give more details regarding their chosen poem. In a geography class the students may post a picture of the earth or even a unique geographical space and say what they love about the picture. This activity gives students the opportunity to give varied reasons for what they love in the picture (Blaschke and Bedenlier 2020).

Finally, in biology the course lecturer may prompt the students through a question testing the biological process—or example, 'Which of the digestive processes do you find interesting and why?' (Ali et al. 202). After that, the online course instructor will encourage the students to review each other's posts while considering positive criticism in their responses through the employment of discussion forums.

Incorporating social icebreakers in the online classroom is another way of ensuring that the online classroom is interactive among the learners and the course facilitator. Moreover, another strategy would be the use of the case study approach. In this approach, the instructor posts a case study that requires students to give open responses to it following the specific case study. After that, the students can be allowed to critique each other's responses positively. This prompts the students to interact and learn diverse responses to the situation posed in the case study (Ali et al. 2021; Garcia and Cabanas 2021). The use of this approach promotes social inclusion in the online learning environment.

The facilitator can also use content-based discussions to promote learning in the online environment. Such discussions have proved effective, especially when the course facilitator poses the discussions as intensive seminar questions, and the students use their critical analysis skills to promote responses to these questions. These discussions have served effectively during the instrumentally social phase of the online course. Such discussions often help students learn from

each other since they have novel ideas, insights, and perceptions of the subject matter they share (Danchikov et al. 2021). This approach makes online learning appreciative of the novelty in each student in terms of their creative ideas, insights, and viewpoints about the subject content posted before them. Thus, the strategy generally promotes active learning within the online learning environment.

Facilitator-generated and student-generated discussion questions can also be used to create interaction in the online learning environment. Facilitator-generated questions play a significant role in the sense that they direct students to be practical and share relevant information in the course and help in the modelling of critical thinking and analytical skills in the students. These questions effectively guide students' private studies (Erickson et al. 2021). However, it is important to note that the facilitator-generated questions have one limitation, especially if they are close-ended questions: they do not provide an opportunity for variety in terms of the responses required from the students (Barber, William, and Adams 2021).

On the other hand, the student-generated questions have the advantage of making students consider a variety of ways to critique a question posed. Besides, this strategy helps students focus on the interesting elements in the course. The disadvantage of this method is that some students may not have the prerequisite skills to participate in such discussions. This strategy requires a lot of time investment on the part of the learners for it to be effective (Cross, Robinson, and Todd 2021). Thus, an online facilitator may choose to amalgamate these methods, using each as appropriate to promote learning in the classroom environment for online learners.

Nevertheless, other strategies can be considered supplementary in the online learning environment to enrich interaction in the online learning environment. Such methods include the basic online debate where the facilitator may pose a question that will trigger an instructional debate among the learners, where discussion with students leads where students guide the discussions, and grading is done for all the discussions. Furthermore, student-initiated discussions where students have rotating roles and grading is done for these discussions. It is important to note that a discussion rubric should guide the discussion strategies to optimise effectiveness. Other strategies involve the giving of group assignments and peer assignments (Cavalcanti et al. 2021.; Butola 2021). The resultant effect of incorporating these suggested strategies is that it promotes optimal interaction and learner satisfaction in the online learning environment.

## Suggested areas recommended for further research exploration

After this exploration, the following are the suggested areas for further research exploration:

1. Effect of faculty participation in policy formulation, analysis, and Implementation in the distance learning environment
2. An exploration of the role of contingent faculty in the development, implementation, and review of policies in distance learning
3. An exploration of the new challenges for distance learning faculty in the twenty-first century
4. Student-faculty interactions in distance learning in the twenty-first century

## Conclusion

From the literature exploration done in this contribution, it is evident that the gaps, as mentioned earlier in the provision of facilitator support, are currently being experienced in most distance learning institutions. However, it is important to note that the solutions to the gaps in facilitator support are elaborated in the current trends in the provision of facilitator support. Therefore, online pedagogues must ensure that they embrace current methods of providing facilitator support as appropriate to learners to ensure that learning in the online environment occurs seamlessly. Well-documented support systems and continuous professional development programs must be designed to assist facilitators in the ever-changing and evolving environment of distance education.

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