Integration of blackboard in the online learning environment

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 5 years there seems to have been an influx of university's across the nation moving their academic programs to the blended environment. While the purpose of distance education is to make education and training more available to persons that may not time to attend a face-to-face course or training.

In 2008, the UWI created the Open Campus to make education and training available to the masses across the Caribbean. Its operations of distributing education across the region was scaled-up as it forged ahead with blended programming.

With the integration of any new technology into an online learning system there should be thorough research to inform best practices and an implementation plan to guide how the new technology is to be utilized.

Distance education, in every form, has always been an avenue for providing training to a mass amount of learners. However, depending on distance method used to deliver training/instruction the learner may feel isolated due to lack of face-to-face interaction. With the integration of Blackboard in teaching and learning environment, course facilitators believe it contributes to effective communication and student learning.

The purpose of this paper is to show how Blackboard has contributed to improved communication, delivery of instructional content and support of students enrolled in online courses.

Keywords: Blackboard Collaborate, distance learning technologies, distance education, online education, e-learning, e-facilitator

INTRODUCTION

Institutions across the world have rushed to make supplementary use of information and communication technologies (ICT's) to make education and trainings available to learners across a broad spectrum of industries. Technology it seems, is the medium of best fit for those persons interested in distance learning.

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The UWI Open Campus is the fourth campus in The UWI system, with face-to-face campuses in Trinidad & Tobago, Jamaica, and Barbados; with The Open Campus with extension campuses, referred to as Country Sites, in 16 countries. The Open Campus main mode of delivery of academic programs is fully online with The Open Campus Country Sites (OCCS) providing professional and continuing education courses and workshops to their respective communities while supporting academic offerings.

The UWI Open Campus does not have faculty per se, but pull its E-facilitators and Tutors from among the experienced faculties of The UWI face-to-face campuses and other regional educational institutions. In some cases, the faculty are qualified experts in their content area but maybe new to the distance learning environment and the processes in which the Open Campus operates. Therefore, besides being referred to as a E-facilitator or eTutor in the Open Campus environment, the faculty must pass the Managing and Facilitating Online Instruction (MFOI) training course before proceeding to the Open Campus Learning Exchange to update their course space in preparation to receive students.

During this time, there were numerous complaints from students who were relatively new to the online course delivery experience and wanted the interaction provided by the face-to-face environment. After several consultations with students, E-facilitators and eTutors, a committee was assembled to investigate additional technologies in support of teaching and learning and recommend one for a pilot. The Committee chose Blackboard.

In 2010, The Open Campus piloted Blackboard in a few select courses. In early 2011, the result of the pilot was shared with the internal Stakeholders and Blackboard was officially chosen for integration into all courses. For some persons that were involved in the pilot stage, the transition was easy. However, for others the transition was not as easy and in some cases there was resistance to the technology.

Training for E-facilitators on the use of Blackboard took place late evenings during the summer for the duration of one week, with the expectation that persons would be ready to use Blackboard in the next course offer in late 2011. To illustrate the use of Blackboard, all of the trainings were recorded and made available to all E-facilitators and eTutors for later reference.

It has been one year since the integration of Blackboard into the online course space and as a form of best practice, it is time to examine and discuss how the integration of Blackboard into the teaching and learning environment has enhanced the delivery of curriculum and training within the Region. This paper also addresses the results of The

Online Learning with Blackboard Survey that was used to capture perceptions of E-facilitators who facilitate distance learning throughout the Caribbean on behalf of the University.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Amitage & O'Leary, (2003), p.4, as cited by Masino (2013), e-learning is defined as the use of digital technologies and media to deliver support and enhance teaching, learning, assessment and evaluation. As issues of learning at a distance continue to mount, the isolation of learners from resources, support, peers and complaints about the lack of face-to-face interaction and delayed feedback continue to remain a major issue (Masino, et.al). To alleviate some of the isolation felt by students some educational institutions have elected to use Blackboard to supplement their distance learning programs by providing real-time interaction as requested by students.

What is Blackboard?

Blackboard, much like Moodle and Angel, is a web-based learning management system (LMS) that is designed to supplement hybrid and face-to-face courses. In some cases, Blackboard may house full online courses while providing tools and course feature to enhance the learning experience (The University of Texas Arlington, Blackboard resources).

Blackboard is a tool that allows faculty to add resources for students to access online. PowerPoint, captivate, video, audio, animation, and other applications are created outside of Blackboard and added into Blackboard courses for students to enhance teaching and learning efforts.

Used appropriately, Blackboard can support effective teaching and learning. Blackboard allows the E-facilitator to provide multiple content format (text, images, sound, audio, graphs, etc.) which allows students to find material based on their preferred learning style. (http://blackboardsupport.calpoly.edu/content)

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RESEARCH QUESTION

How has the integration of Blackboard into the online teaching environment enhanced the delivery of curriculum and training within the Caribbean?

METHODOLOGY

The Survey was sent via SurveyMonkey® to E-facilitators on schedule to teach in the fall semester of 2012. Data collected was received through an online software program and retrieved via Microsoft Excel®. The Survey extended a two-month period, November 2012 through December 2012.

Limitations

The online survey data collected is from a cross section of disciplines in which E-facilitators were scheduled to teach in the online environment in the fall semester of 2012.

The disciplines represented in this study are as follows: Literacy Studies, Math, Economics and Management Studies. In this regard, a majority of the courses in Education Programs offered do not use Blackboard in their course and therefore their responses would not have been captured.

DATA ANALYSIS

Survey participants were sent a link to Survey Monkey®, an external data management system. All survey responses were anonymous and confidential. Survey participants were not compensated for their responses.

Of the four disciplines represented, there were eighteen (18) E-facilitator responses to the online survey.

The Survey was sent to respondents in electronic format via the Internet through SurveyMoney® where the results were tabulated as they were received. Further to the original notice, a reminder notice to complete the Survey was sent to E-facilitators prior to the closing date indicated. Eighteen (18) E-facilitators (33%) responded to the Online Learning with Blackboard Survey.

When E-facilitators were asked if they believed that Blackboard was an effective communication tool with their eTutor, 55.6% of survey participant's reported it was very effective and 44.4% reported it was slightly effective, as indicated in Figure 1 (Appendix).

When asked if Blackboard contributed to student learning in their course, 61.1% strongly believed, 33.3% slightly believed and 5.6% somewhat believed.

As indicated in Figure 2 (Appendix), E-facilitator were asked if they believed the frequency of tutorial sessions were appropriate to support learning of the content in their course, 66.7% strongly believed, 11.1% slightly believed, 11.1% somewhat believed and 11.1% reported not at all.

E-facilitators were asked if the length of time for their Blackboard tutorial sessions were appropriate to support learning of the content in their course, 77.8% strongly believed, while 16.7% slightly believed and 5.6% had no opinion.

As indicated in Figure 3 (Appendix), E-facilitators were asked if Blackboard should be used in all online courses and 66.7% strongly believed, 11.1% slightly believed, 16.7% somewhat believed while 5.6% had no opinion.

E-facilitators were asked if they believed the use of Blackboard sessions have an impact on being connected with others in the course, 76.5% strongly believe, 17.6% slightly believe and 5.9% somewhat believed.

As indicated in Figure 4 (Appendix), E-facilitators were asked to rate the value of their Blackboard Session in their course on a scale from 1 to 5 with 5 being the highest and 38.9% rated the value as 5, 38.9% rated reported a rate of 4 and 22.2% rated the value as 3.

E-facilitators were asked to rate the level of meaningful interaction through Blackboard in a scale from 1 to 5 with 5 being the highest, 12.5% rated the value as 5, 43.8% rated the value as 4, and 43.8% rated the value as 3.

As indicated in Figure 5 (Appendix), E-facilitators were asked if Blackboard is sufficiently utilized to support online course content, 50% slightly believed, 22.2% somewhat believed, 16.7% reported not all and 11.1% had no opinion.

E-facilitators were asked if they experienced any technical challenges during their Blackboard sessions, 33.3% reported they experienced challenges, 33.3% reported experiencing some challenges and 27.8% reported that they did not experience challenges.

As indicated in Figure 6 (Appendix), E-facilitators reported that they experienced challenges during their Blackboard Session 37.5% reported they received significant support, 50% reported they received some support while 12.5% had no opinion at all.

E-facilitators experienced challenges and was provided support, 25% reported that that support was provided by a technician at the Site, 50% was provided support by a Learning Support Specialist, 25% reported that a Course Delivery Assistant provided support and 6.3% reported they were provided assistance through the Help Desk. Most notably is that 25% of E-facilitators reported they received assistance by other means.

DISCUSSION

From the data received, 55.6% of E-facilitators, believe that Blackboard is an effective communication tool, although 44.4% believed it was slightly effective. E-facilitators overwhelmingly believed that Blackboard contributed to student learning and the frequency of the tutorial sessions were appropriate.

As the amount of Blackboard sessions for each course has increased over the years, it appears from the survey responses that some E-facilitators are still hesitant in the use of Blackboard in their course which may create a need for continuous training on the technology.

Interestingly enough, E-facilitators rated the use of Blackboard in their course at 38.9% as strongly believe and 38.9% slightly believe respectively.

When asked what they liked most about their Blackboard Sessions E-facilitators reported they liked:

- "the multiple modes of communicating at the same time e.g. texting, voiceover";
- "The convenience of delivering a "lecture" from home and being able to interact with student on a name basis and using postings made in the comment box. I am able to call students by name and tell them what they are not clear on."
- "The fact that it offers the opportunity to interact in real-time with students from within your own environment, instead of having to go to the Site each time. The recordings are also useful."
- "The ease of use and being able to navigate from Blackboard to other slides and resource on the use of Blackboard are available at any time."
- "The ability to have real-time dialog with students and use visual tools to assist in the interactions"
- "I like that I can interact with my students to explain and discuss concepts that may be difficult to comprehend. I also like that I can use Elluminate Publish to create podcasts of the Blackboard sessions so that students can access the recording without having to log into the Blackboard server."

When asked what they like least about Blackboard, E-facilitators reported the following:

- "Technical problems"
- The total removal of animations from my PowerPoint Presentation. I therefore have to spend more time explaining rather than explaining and demonstrating simultaneously. It is my belief that BbC would be more effective when used in collaboration with ICTs such as multimedia presentations which students have said they find to be quite useful. Perhaps your team could consider training persons who deliver the quantitative courses especially, how to synchronize the audio with the PPP to create the multimedia presentations."
- "It's new technology so sometimes the learning curve may be a bit steep."
- "It shuts down sometimes while in use, and you have to log on again"
- "Many students seem to lack the training in how to use it, so many avoid the BbC sessions."

- "It is stiff. Unable to upload stuff on the board. Unable to enter session even though I clicked on the join session button. Seems that there are multiple rooms and it just does not work for me."
- "Students prefer to chat while you are explaining. It would be good if they use the mic."
- "The firewall that prevents students from accessing the course."
- "Glitches between the whiteboard and the left char margin – not being in sync"
- "Disruptive participants"
- "The fact that students can still "hide"
- "File sharing settings a bit more challenging to maneuver than Elluminate"
- "Too much dependency by students will be moving close to onsite than online."
- There are still some degree of "shyness" with students not willing to use the microphone to pose their questions, Verbal interaction is still one way."

When asked about other communication tools used in the course, 83.3% of E-facilitators reported Skype, 5.6% reported video-conferencing, 5.6% reported teleconferencing, 11.1% reported e-portfolio, 22.2% reported Turnitin and 100% reported email. As to the "other" category, E-facilitators responded "up until last year, I used teleconferencing but I was given the impression that teleconferencing is no longer available. Another E-facilitator responded that they used Message facility in their course as it is confidential and there is a record of use between students, their ETutor and E-facilitator.

Clearly there is a need for continued training on the use of the technology which should also extend to technicians at the various Sites as E-facilitators utilize their support delivery of their course. As to quality assurance, from the data reported, the Open Campus Academic Programming and Delivery Division (APAD) through Learning Support and Course Delivery are operating at their optimal levels.

CONCLUSION

With any new technology, there is always a learning curve, but in the case of The UWI Open Campus E-facilitator and ETutor, they seem to be open to the challenge. What plays an important part in the process is making sure E-facilitators are continually involved in the process.

Professional and continuing professional development from the Open Campus will also play a pivotal role in training E-facilitators to the myriad of new technologies that may be adopted over the next few years.

This study is not the end, but the beginning as further research is in process on the student perception of the use of Blackboard in their course/programme. The results of the student survey will be analyzed and presented to the delivery unit for further follow-up. The data will be shared with E-facilitators and students for further research to inform the training needs throughout The UWI Open Campus. Analysed

Appendix

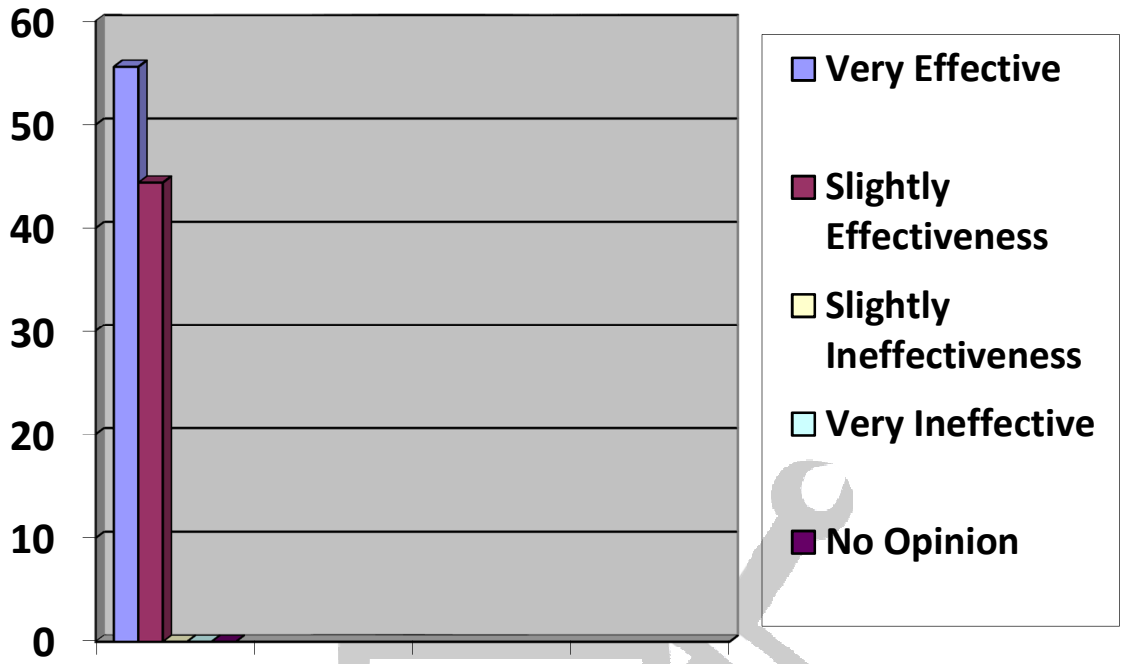

Figure 1 Blackboard as an Effective Communication Tool

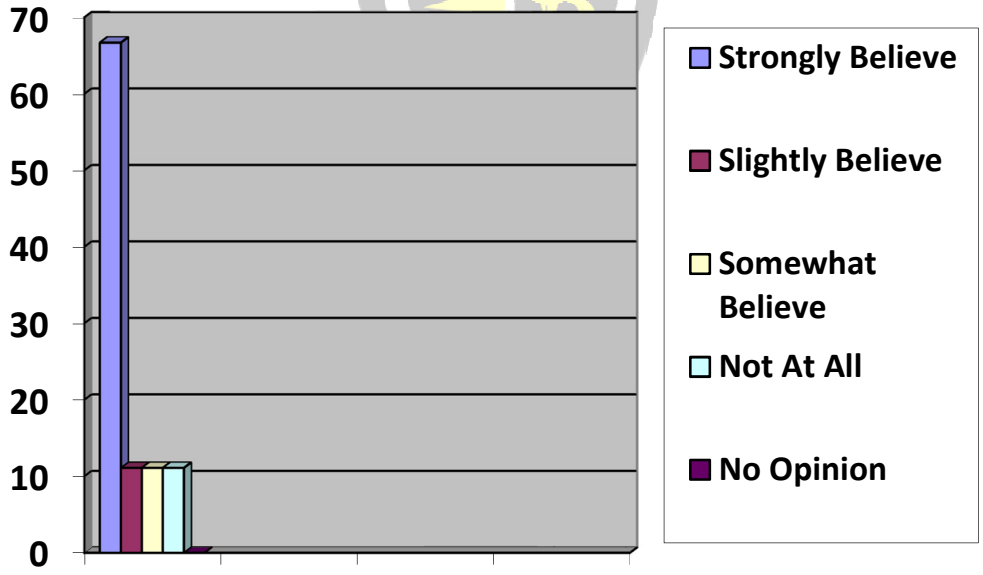

Figure 2 Frequency of Tutorial Sessions to Support Learning of Content

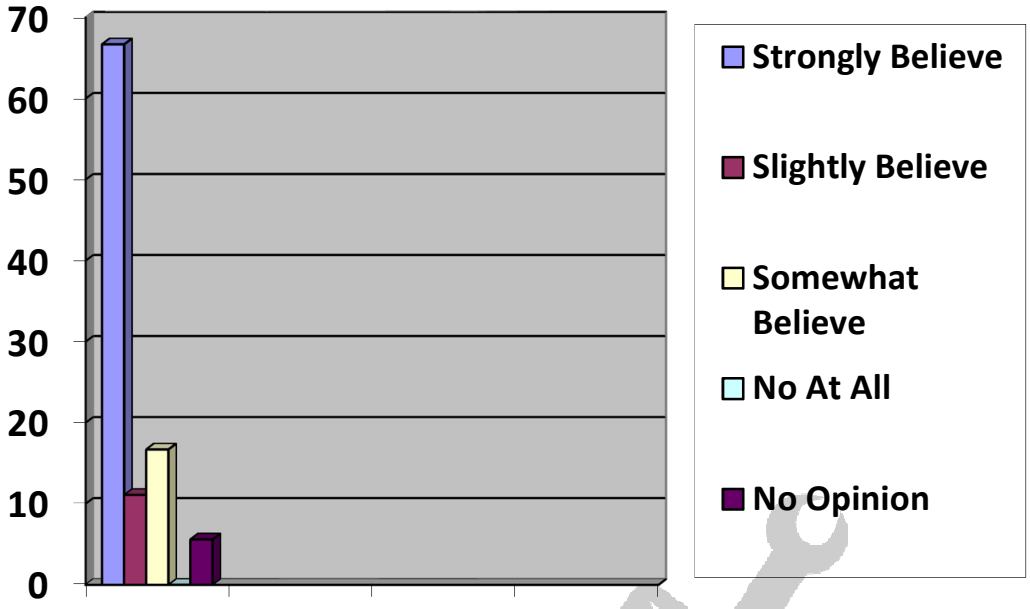

Figure 3 Blackboard Use in All Online Courses

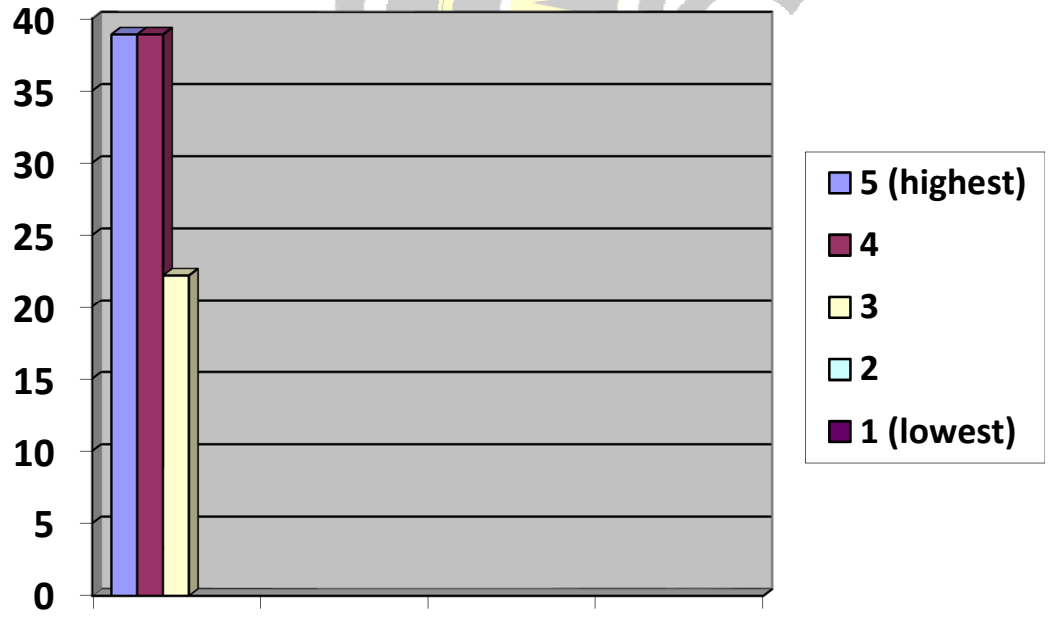

Figure 4 E-facilitator Rating of the value of their in-course Blackboard Session

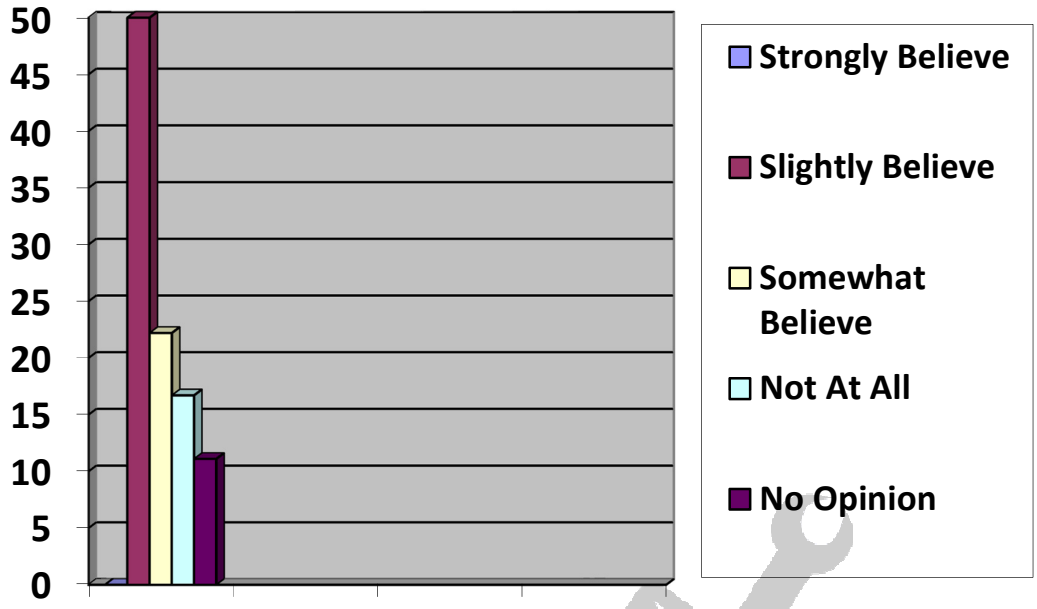

Figure 5 Blackboard Use Sufficient to Support Online Course Content

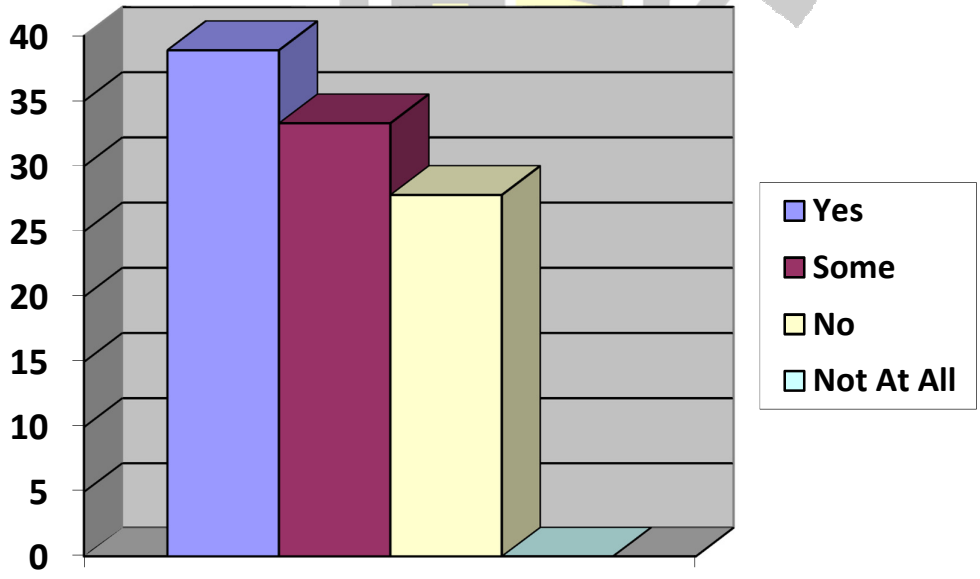

Figure 6 E-facilitators experiencing Technical Challenges

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