

The anonymous learners: a critical reflection on some assumptions regarding rural and city learners

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ABSTRACT

Unisa learners come from diverse contexts, histories and cultures. The specific geographic location of the learners impacts on the total learning experience and the success thereof. Assumptions about the Unisa learner, the quality of teaching and administrative support determine to a large extent the design of learning materials and the support that learners receive.

This article documents the stories of learners living in Mmarobala, Limpopo Province and learners from the Tswane Metropol, and investigates some assumptions of lecturers and administrative staff about Unisa learners and the effects thereof on the learning experiences of the students.

INTRODUCTION

In presenting this case study, I will critically reflect on some assumptions held by teaching and administrative staff of the University of South Africa (Unisa) about its learners, and the effects of these assumptions on the administrative and academic support learners receive in this distance education environment. Unisa is a predominantly print-based distance education institution with more than 130 000 learners in South Africa and the rest of the world. The assumptions we have of the presumed differences between the rural learners and the learners living in major cities further influence the assumptions we have about learners' learning experience.

From the case study we will question the validity of some of our assumptions about two aspects of distance learning in the South African context:

- The differences between distance learners in the more rural areas and their city counterparts
- The kind of teaching, learning and administrative support that is needed by learners at Unisa

In critically reflecting on the identified assumptions, we will first identify the assumptions that underlie our thoughts and actions, then scrutinise the accuracy and validity of these in the light of the experience of the learners in their different contexts. Finally, an attempt will be made to address these assumptions to make them more inclusive and integrative (Brookfield 1990:177).

The assumptions that underlie the views on learners in their different contexts and the learning/teaching paradigm at Unisa influence the support that learners get in their learning experience - academic as well as administrative. Brookfield (1990:177) calls such assumptions "the interpretative glue that binds the various meaning schemes comprising our structures of understanding". This research therefore aims not to raise sympathy for the plight

of the rural learner, but to address some basic assumptions of administrative and academic support at Unisa.

Brookfield (1990:178) describes such a reflective process as "laying down charges of psychological dynamite" which, when exploded, can crumble the assumptive world. This process is psychologically and politically dangerous, involving risks to one's livelihood, social networks, and psychological stability. In critically reflecting on the assumptions, this article does not assume to be the only voice, or to be the result of divine inspiration. But the following assumptions, as they presently operate in the academic and administrative support structures at Unisa, critically influence the learning experience.

Assumptions about the learning situation

- Unisa learners are independent and autonomous
- Learners who enroll for computer courses have ready access to computers
- Male learners are not ensnared in the conventions of a traditional patriarchal society
- The completion of a degree leads to employment

Assumptions about the teaching situation

- Academics in distance education institutions are not only subject specialists but good teachers who understand the complexity of distance education as well as the unique needs of the distance education learner
- Teaching occurs when the subject content has been delivered to the learner
- Support is seen as delivered by other departments and is not an inherent aspect of distance education materials and the learning contract between the institution and the learner
- Prescribed text books are the only way to introduce specialised knowledge to learners
- Assignments are a matter of academic evaluation of the learners' ability to show they have internalised the specified knowledge

Assumptions about administrative issues

- Postal delivery of materials and correspondence ensures timeous contact with the learner
- Learners have ready access to telephones and can or will successfully contact the lecturer or the institution when necessary

Assumptions about the geographic situation of the learners

- Rural learners are more disadvantaged than their city counterparts in the learning situation
- Learners in the city have more access to the resources on the main campus

Professional educators and institutions of higher learning claim to "know" their learners. We promise them a better life, access to the spoils of employment and a capitalist society - but many graduates do not find the "better life for all". Many learners disappear as the anonymous casualties of broken and misdirected promises.

BACKGROUND

At first this research included only three learners who live in the Mmarobala village in the Limpopo province. After the initial investigation, the research was expanded to compare the findings with the experiences of three other learners who live in the Tswane Metropolitan area: one in Hammanskraal and two in Pretoria (Sunnyside and Lynnwood, respectively). Consequently, a total of six learners were included in the research.

Mmarobala village is situated some 35 kilometers from Polokwane in the Limpopo Province, two and a half hours north of Pretoria. Polokwane is the capital of the Limpopo Province. The regional office of Unisa in Polokwane registers approximately 7 000 students, has a well-equipped library as well as a computer microlab. Polokwane is the largest city in the province, offering the most work opportunities as well as being the centre for all Provincial state departments.

Mmarobala consists of approximately 5 000 - 8 000 dwellings on mostly one hectare plots. It is governed by traditional headmen and a kgoši (chief). Dwellings include well-built and well-structured houses to shacks built of various materials. Each house is a place of safety for between 8-15 people. Although the houses differ in size and architecture, the majority of houses consist of a communal area with a table, chairs, and a radio and/or television set. Adjacent to this communal area are one to three rooms where the family members sleep. Most of the homes have prepaid electricity but no running water. Water is fetched on a daily basis in containers on wheelbarrows from several water points in town. The lines of people waiting to fill their containers with water form early in the morning and continue to well into the night. Water supply to the village is irregular and sometimes the village is without water for more than a week. In this subsistence economy, families plant their fields with maize to harvest (should rain permit it), have a number of chickens and some households even have one or more head of cattle roaming the veld.

"Family" is another term including a vast variety and number of people - from extended family members of various relations to visitors and other dependents. These households usually form around a grandfather and/or mother, who fulfils not only the role of matriarch/patriarch, but in many cases also provide the only income for the household in the form of an old age pension grant of R570 per month. Many households of up to ten people survive on this income.

The village of Mmarobala is part of the bigger Dikgale district which is split by the national road going to Duiwelskloof. It is spread out over a vast area with no visible evidence of town planning. Amongst the scattered houses are two primary schools, two secondary schools, a police station and a clinic.

The only means of transport to and from Polokwane is by means of 15-seater taxis or lorries which accept hitchhikers. The return fee to Polokwane from the village is about R15-00. The availability of transport depends on the number of people intending to travel as well as the time of the day. There is almost no transport available at night. If students wish to arrive in Polokwane at 08:00, they have to get up at approximately 04:00 in order to walk around looking for transport. Should they be lucky enough to find a taxi (or for it to find them!), they could still travel for up to an hour inside the village looking for more commuters. Only when the taxi is eventually full will their journey to Polokwane start.

Scattered amongst the houses in Mmarobala are a number of small stores selling necessities and providing access to public phones. As in the case of fetching water, using a public phone is a matter of waiting in line. Most of these "telephone-shops" close at 19:00 at night. The closest academic bookshop is found in Polokwane, 35 kilometers away, with a limited number of books. Buying prescribed books in time (should one be able to afford them) is a harrowing experience.

Although there is a satellite postal "office" available in Mmarobala, all three of the Unisa learners in this case study had other postal addresses. Many Unisa learners who live in rural areas make use of the postal boxes or street addresses of either their employers or family members - resulting in post taking even longer to reach its final destination.

The three learners in the Tswane Metropolitan area live in diverse circumstances. One of the learners lives in Hammanskraal and although Hammanskraal is considered to be close to Pretoria, the circumstances resemble many of the aspects of Mmarobala village. The learners residing in Sunnyside and Lynnwood are assumed to be the closer to a number of resources,

but the research shows them to be just as disadvantaged in the learning experiences as their rural counterparts.

NATURE OF THE RESEARCH

The research was started as part of a portfolio for the Certificate Programme for Distance Education Practitioners at Unisa in 2001. As tutor and student advisor at the Unisa regional office in Polokwane, I became aware of the uniqueness of the Distance Education learning experience, as a learner myself but also as a tutor and a member of the administrative staff. The unique plight and frustrations of the students registering at the regional centre were the motivating factors in critically evaluating some of the basic assumptions underlying the learning experience at Unisa. In 2002 I was appointed as Learning Developer and met with some learners who had moved to the Tswane Metropolitan area to be "closer" to the Main campus with the assumption that their learning experiences would be enhanced.

The research was conducted through a number of structured interviews with the participants (learners and Unisa staff). The interviews were completed during visits to Mmarobala and the residences of the city learners and interviews with staff on campus. The interviews with the learners were structured firstly, to explore the students' socioeconomic situation and the effect of this on their learning experience, and secondly, to explore the effect of their specific location (whether rural or urban) on the progression in their studies. The interviews with the Unisa staff focused on their assumptions about rural and city learners. In the course of my investigation, not only was I granted access to the learners' learning experiences, but increasingly also to the more sacred inner worlds of their homes and their culture.

THE LEARNERS

All the learners in the study were black men. Of the six learners, two were unemployed and single, two were employed and in a permanent relationship, and two were employed and single. My decision to interview men only perhaps deserves some explanation in the light of the plight of female learners in this country and the unique circumstances in which they study. My choice was influenced by the fact that as a white male, I would not have had regular access into the lives of female learners in a rural community due to prohibitive traditions and perceptions. I do not, however, negate the plight and circumstances of female learners. That I chose men in this research highlights the unique circumstances of the male learners who study with loans and/or financial help from their families with the explicit understanding that they carry and will carry the fortunes and survival of the whole family group with them. The pressure on these male learners as "providers" is a neglected issue concurrent to the unique circumstances and learning environment of female learners. While women in a patriarchal society have to deal with the daily survival of whole families by fulfilling obligations determined by that society, male learners are in turn expected to be the providers.

The decision to research assumptions about learning and the effects thereof on the learning experiences of black learners was further encouraged by the present drive to redress the effects of social and other injustices to previously disadvantaged groups.

In the following section each learner who participated in the study will be introduced, and the findings of each interview will be discussed in terms of the effects of their living circumstances on their learning experience. This is done with a view to evaluating the stated assumptions about learning, using the Mmarobala case studies as a foundation for this evaluation. The stories of the three urban learners will be briefly discussed thereafter, with specific reference to new information that emerged in these interviews. Additional research into the specific circumstances of the learners in Sunnyside and the implications of these circumstances for learning is currently in progress.

David

David is married to Vinolia, and the couple have one child, Given, one year old. In 2001 David was registered for the Certificate in Datametrics and was in his second year. The Certificate in Datametrics is a ten-module programme in the field of Mathematics and/or Computer Science. David had passed three Mathematics modules in 2000, and was registered for four Computer Science modules.

David holds a Secondary Teacher's Diploma (STD) from Setotlwane College (earned in 1988) and is teaching Science at a secondary school 15 kilometres from his house. He financed his studies on his own in his first year; an uncle paid for his second year and he obtained a bursary in his third year. Although as a Science teacher, he will be sought after in the teaching profession, David does not want to stay in teaching. His only motivation for studying teaching was the availability of teaching jobs, specifically in the numerical and science subjects.

David studies in the room which houses the kitchen, the TV and the only table with three chairs. He often arrives home after 17:00 due to transport difficulties. He then takes care of his son Given to give Vinolia time to go and fetch water, some 600 metres from their house. The evening prior to the interview, David only started studying at 21:30 after looking after Given while Vinolia fetched water. While he studies, Vinolia prepares their evening meal next to him, feeds Given and watches her favourite TV show.

Being employed as a teacher means that David only has Saturdays to travel to Unisa's regional office in Polokwane to use the computer microlab and to attend tutorials at the Learning Centre. The tutorial programme is part of the academic support programme Unisa offers, although learners pay extra to attend the tutorials. Such a trip does not only have cost implications, but is also time-consuming in the light of transport difficulties. The weekly trips to Polokwane are very important since David, who is registered for a diploma in Datametrics and is taking four modules in Computer Science, has no access to a computer at home. Saturdays have become David's most optimal time for studying. Since computer science is a very practical field of study, the lack of a computer presents huge challenges to David.

With these circumstances in mind, David's contact with lecturers is not a privilege but an absolute necessity, whether the contact is established by means of the telephone or written comments in the assignments. Aside from the emotional value of such contact, the dialogue inherent in teaching is an important value in distance education. Unisa's lecturers are usually available only in the mornings to answer telephonic enquires. David teaches in the mornings. In the afternoons, should he want to phone, his lecturers will no longer be in their offices. Should David be so lucky as to have the home number of his lecturers, phoning in itself is a costly and time-consuming experience. Many lecturers acknowledge the necessity of opening an option for learners to contact them after hours, but do not realise that the option is not as easy as they would like to believe.

Due to a number of factors, inter alia semesterisation and modularisation, administrative issues have become a nightmare for many learners at Unisa. To phone the main campus from a public phone often turns out to be costly, time-consuming and often unsuccessful. Reasons for this include the following:

- Learners phone the wrong section and have to be transferred.
- Learners do not identify their problem correctly and have to be transferred, sometimes more than once.
- Many of the administrative staff are not committed to customer service, do not understand the unique circumstances of the distance education learner and/or are poorly trained.

Although telephone contact between learners and lecturers or administrative staff is not always considered important, in many instances it is a matter of pass or fail for the learner. For example, with the changing curricula and increasing specialisation of subjects and degrees, it has become more difficult for learners to know which and how many modules to

choose to complete a specific level or subject. For example, in 2001 Linguistics 200 comprised four modules, only three of which were compulsory if a learner did not wish to continue with the subject into the third year. Many learners who did not have access to this information took the unnecessary fourth module, resulting in a waste of time, money, energy and resources. Although administrative staff are appointed to assist in preventing such mistakes, this system is far from foolproof. When errors are detected, communication between the University and the learner is further impeded by the lack of telephonic contact and the delay in receiving post discussed earlier in this document. When learners do receive letters and wish to contact the University to discuss the contents further, the cycle of costly and frustrated attempts at communication continues.

There were four prescribed text books which David needed and the cost in total exceeded R2 000. Taking into consideration the cost of registering, many learners are not aware and even less prepared for the "hidden" costs of studying, such as text books, attending tutorials, and so on. To obtain the prescribed books from the local Unisa library often also proves futile. Many learners then have either sporadic contact with the prescribed material when they try to borrow a book from a fellow learner, or no contact at all, relying instead on the study guides to navigate through very technical and difficult content.

David did not pass any of his four modules in 2001. He is enrolled in 2002 to repeat three modules.

Penane

Penane turned 21 in 2001. He was in his first year of his studies towards a Bachelor of Science, and had enrolled for seven modules.

Penane lives in his aunt's household in Mmarobala, sharing the house with his aunt and uncle, her four children, and his two grandparents. Penane's uncle is employed in Gauteng. He visits the homestead once every two months. The aunt sells vegetables on a nearby street corner. The income of the household in Mmarobala comes mainly from the pension of the two grandparents. (Since this interview was conducted, Penane's grandmother has passed away). Penane was studying with a loan from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, which allowed him some funds for prescribed books. He worked for six hours a day on a temporary basis at Mmarobala Trading Store's telephone facility, earning R350 a month. Although the income helps the extended family to survive, Penane's work forces him to plan his studies and time allocation carefully. In addition to this work, he also has family duties, including looking after the cattle occasionally in the week, collecting firewood, and so on.

The homestead has prepaid electricity but no running water. Although Penane studies Computer Science, he has no access to a computer in Mmarobala, and has to travel to Polokwane to study and practise in the Computer Microlab. Although Penane qualified to register for a Bachelor of Science degree, matriculating with 50% for English Second Language Higher Grade, his choice of seven modules was unrealistic and ill-advised. Of the seven modules he registered for, five were Computer Science and Informatics modules.

His enrollment for a Bachelor of Science degree was Penane's first encounter with a computer and related studies. In the light of his background, communication between Penane, as a first year rural learner, and his lecturers was of the utmost importance. As an integral part of the learning experience, assignments create a unique opportunity for communication. The need for the marker of an assignment to understand this concept as well as the unique circumstances and needs of a distance education learner are crucial.

This is not a plea for the lowering of standards, but for the necessary empathy and concern that the learner is justified in expecting, especially on a first year level. Lecturers dealing with first year learners should understand and respect the learner's background, aspirations and paradigms of learning. First year learners studying in a second or third language, and coming from a rural background, share a need to have their efforts appreciated, however wrong or off

the mark. Assignments should be used to encourage, to tutor, to nurture, to enthuse. Many lecturers do not understand the need for such communication in marking an assignment.

Penane handed in three assignments for INF105-9 (Information Science). To obtain admission for examinations, he had to pass three assignments. He failed his first assignment, scoring 48%. The response to a first assignment is crucial to the learning experience. In Penane's case, except for the percentage (in red), no comments were written on the pages. Although some remarks were scribbled next to wrong answers, these were merely content-related and not directional or encouraging. Penane worked harder for his second assignment. As the assignment deadline had arrived, Penane wanted to submit the assignment personally at the regional office but did not have the funds to travel the 35 kilometres. Instead he gave it to an acquaintance to submit electronically via SOL (Students on Line). The person he asked unfortunately never submitted the assignment.

Penane realised his predicament and worked even harder. He handed in assignment 03. He received the assignment back with no percentage indicated, but with an indication that he received 60 admission credits for his effort. No mark, no comments. At that stage Penane had 89 admission credits, not enough to obtain admission to the examination. He received a communication from the department giving learners another chance to obtain enough credits by submitting another assignment. He received the assignment back, signed but containing no marks, no markings inside the assignment, not one remark or comment - no visible indication that the lecturer or marker had actually read the assignment. Attached to the comments page of the assignment cover was a photocopied piece of paper with the following comment:

THIS ASSIGNMENT WILL BE CONSIDERED FOR EXAMINATION ADMISSION PURPOSES. PLEASE REFER TO MODEL SOLUTION IN INF105-9/103-2001.

If it is accepted that the marking of an assignment is a remarkable opportunity for communication between lecturer and learner, these examples show how the institution failed Penane. Not only was an opportunity to communicate meaningfully with learners missed, but Penane felt left in the cold and unappreciated. The interview suggests that Penane lost faith in the support of an institution which claims to "take the distance out of distance education". Remarks on an assignment are part and parcel of the learning experience of a distance education learner. By not making any remarks or comments, the department and Unisa failed to deliver their part of the learning contract between the institution and the learner.

In COS 113-4 (Computer Science), assignment 02, Penane wrote the following comment on the assignment cover: "I was try(sic) very hard to get all the questions to be answered, and the (sic) were very hard or difficult to catch up or understand". There was no indication that the lecturer saw, read or took notice of this call for understanding and help.

Penane, like so many other learners, should have been advised to take fewer courses in the first year of registration. Seven modules proved to be too many. In total Penane handed in 17 assignments in seven modules in eight months. It shows considerable dedication, commitment and effort. Not surprisingly, Penane failed six of the seven subjects, although not due to a lack of trying. In the light of his poor performance, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme was not willing to fund another attempt in 2002. Penane has now enrolled for only two modules in 2002 and is partially funded by a sponsor.

Piet

Piet (aged 24) was registered in 2001 for the four modules he needed in order to complete his BA degree. His majors were Communication and Criminology.

Piet lives with his mother and grandmother and seven other family members, none of whom are employed. They live on the pensions received by his mother and grandmother. Should rain allow, they plant some maize to provide some relief in their subsistence existence. Being

the oldest male in the house, Piet has a room of his own, but studies in the communal dining room. He is employed on a temporary, sporadic basis as an administrative worker at Unisa's regional office in Polokwane.

Piet's main concern in his studies was that although he would be completing his degree in 2001, employment opportunities with Communication and Criminology were scarce. His main drawback seems to be that his major subjects do not give him access to any clearly defined occupation. With these subjects, the field of teaching (for many other learners a last resort) is also not an option. He studies were funded by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme. If it were not for financial constraints, he would have liked to have started with Law studies in 2002 or an Honours degree in Communication or Criminology. His choice of law as a further degree is influenced by the fact that a Law degree might give him a wider choice of employment. However, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme does not pay for a second degree.

As part of Piet's wider context, the pressure on him to start providing for his family has become almost unbearable. His family can not quite understand why he has been studying for six years and cannot find employment.

In CMN314-6 (Communication 300), a compulsory assignment required learners to choose from a prescribed list ten popular videos and critically evaluate them. While the assignment makes academic sense, the implication of getting access to ten specific videos in a rural area with limited resources at home, made a huge impact on Piet. Mmarobala village does not have a video shop, and would most probably not have had the videos Piet was required to evaluate. Furthermore, Piet and his family do not have a VCR and neither did any of his friends or neighbours. Piet's only available option was to hire these videos from a video shop in Polokwane some 35 kilometers away and ask permission from the Regional Unisa library to use their VCR and monitor. The possibility that a video shop in Polokwane would rent Piet (without permanent employment or a street address in Polokwane) the videos was remote. Even if he did get access to the videos, the cost of hiring them would have been in the vicinity of R200, excluding Piet's traveling costs to Polokwane.

Taking into account the unique course content of CMN314-6, the assignment was a creative option to get learners to critically interact with a given medium and message. At a residential university the class most probably would have watched the videos together, or the learners would have had access to a wider range of options. However, when the same assignment functions in a distance education context, the assumptions of learning and teaching change dramatically. Although Piet finally managed to gain access to the videos through a student advisor who works at the Unisa Polokwane office (who had a contract with a local video store), it does not excuse the assumptions made by the lecturer and the institution.

Piet successfully completed his BA in 2001 and is presently enrolled for his Honours in Criminology through a study grant.

Samuel

Samuel is partly employed and lives in Hammanskraal in a three-roomed house shared with his parents and another five members of his extended family. Both parents are unemployed. He succeeded obtaining his matric certificate at the age of 24 after many interruptions to his schooling due to a lack of finances for school fees. After completing Standard 8 he remained at home for two years. He returned to school for one year to do his Standard nine, but again had to interrupt his studies for one year after this due to a lack of finances. Samuel eventually passed matric with English as second language with an "F" symbol (33%). He worked as a gardener and has recently been appointed as an apprentice cashier at a garage.

Since completing matric Samuel's dream has been to become a policeman. This dream has never been realised. His present employer decided to enroll Samuel for the Access programme at Unisa to provide him with an opportunity to enroll for a degree should he wish

to. Samuel is presently enrolled for Learning Skills (LSK011-9). His poor matric results, the many disruptions he experienced as well as his standard of English did not prepare Samuel for, among other things, the level of English used as medium of instruction in the course, and the different world views presented. Although attending the tutorial support program, his lack of sufficient vocabulary seriously hampers his attempts to learn. Samuel spends most of his studying time looking up words in the dictionary and sometimes loses interest due to the huge amount of words he does not understand.

Receiving his study package from Unisa was a traumatic experience, and not conducive to him to embark upon the learning process. Opening the package he found two audiotapes without any labels, a CD-Rom as well as a stack of library request cards, stationery, a Tutorial Letter 101 and a study guide. Samuel was lost. His first reaction was to panic because he did not have a tape recorder at home, or have access to a tape recorder. He did not know that the CD-Rom included in the package was for a computer, and thought it was an audio CD. There was no guidance regarding where to start with what. In assembling the package it was assumed that learners would know where to start and what to do with all the material received. It was further assumed that learners would know that the Tutorial Letter 101 contains most of the information they would immediately need. The assignments for the Access course that Samuel took are compulsory, but the learner is not guided as to how much of the study material to cover before attempting the assignments. There are furthermore three compulsory assignments. Taking into account that most learners doing the Access programme do not come from a culture of reading, and have less than average English second language skills, it is a daunting task to complete the three assignments in time.

Samuel's first assignment was a comprehension test on the Kontiki expedition. The assignment contained fifty questions. The assignment dealt with a geography context totally strange to the South African learner's background, and the material made no attempt to help the learner to understand the foreign terms and concepts. It was assumed that the average learner enrolling for LSK011-9 would, for example, where the Polynesian islands are and that Easter Island has some distinctive statues and would understand that the "discovery" of distant lands and islands is imbedded in a particular cultural and colonial context. The difficulty level of the essay was far more than Samuel could cope with. The Norwegian surnames, the debate about exploring the possibility about contact between the Southern Americas and the islands to the west of Peru, as well as the historical imbeddedness of the story (including references to Christopher Columbus, the date line of the two world wars as well as the advertising genre of that specific era) makes it inaccessible to South African learners. It seems clear that the lecturer assumed that the learner has enough background knowledge to comprehend the argument.

One might argue that Samuel should never have been a university candidate in the first place and that his experience is not normative to the average Access learner. The fact is that the Access programme allows many learners to enter tertiary studies – learners who would never otherwise have had the opportunity. Unisa is an open and distance learning institution which aims to be accessible. However, once the learner has enrolled, it is important to maintain this accessibility. The question arises whether learners should be "screened" when they enroll to allow learners with certain reading and learning skills to do a fast-track LSK011-9, while learners like Samuel do the same course over a year. While the content and the design of LSK011-9 undoubtedly attempts to prepare learners for their first year courses, the assignments should be of such a nature that they increase in difficulty and should far as possible be of an indigenous South African nature.

Samuel's story furthermore raises the issue of the multitudes of learners who enter tertiary education who should not have been university candidates in the first place. While this is true, it is also true that many of them come from a severely disadvantaged schooling background and should be given an opportunity to redress the injustices of the past. Should they have had a better education, many of them might indeed have been university candidates. In the light of this scenario, the responsibility of the institution towards such learners should be seriously reconsidered.

The chances that Samuel will pass his first examination at Unisa are not good. What then? Should he find funds to try again? Will he just become another statistic of the legacy of apartheid or is there a chance that he can become a statistic of a new attempt to empower previously excluded individuals and groups?

Brian

Brian grew up in Mmarobala and relocated to Pretoria in 2002 to be closer to the main campus. His studies are funded by the NSFAS (National Students Financial Aid Scheme). He is presently busy with his third level subjects towards a Bachelor of Commerce degree.

Brian lives in Sunnyside (Pretoria) and shares a two-bedroomed flat with six other young people. None of them are employed full-time and they struggle to make ends meet every month. Although he is very close to the Unisa campus and has access to more resources than when he was in Mmarobala, his finances (or lack thereof) determine to a great extent how many times he can visit the main campus, contact with his lecturers, and so on. Sharing a flat with six other young people excludes any privacy and quiet time to study. Since relocating to Pretoria, Brian and his flatmates have had to move three times due to evictions as a result of outstanding payments..This has severely disrupted Brian's sense of continuity in his learning experience. Furthermore, the constant financial concerns seriously impact on Brian's self-worth and focus. Compared to the general experiences of the rural learners, Brian is assumed to be more privileged and to have an advantage over his rural counterparts. He has experienced the contrary. While the circumstances in Mmarobala were not conducive to supporting his learning experience, there he had the support of a family structure as well as certainty of accommodation.

The socioeconomic situation of Sunnyside is such that wealth and poverty exist side by side. Brian tries to survive and compete at the same time. He has (so far) escaped the spiraling violence of his neighbourhood, but feels he has not survived the competition where designer clothes is the ticket to social status and acceptance.

Amidst all the resources a city offers, Brian struggled to survive to the extent that he may actually be worse off compared to the rural learner.

William

William completed his Honours in Industrial Psychology (cum laude) through the University of the North five years ago. He could not find any immediate employment. In 2001 he enrolled for his Bachelor of Law degree at Unisa in a further attempt to be multi-skilled and to make an impact on the employment sector. For a while he was a tutor at the Learning Centre in Polokwane, but relocated to Pretoria when he was appointed as a marketing officer for a marketing company.

Although he has a proven study track record, he finds the discipline and effort of being a distance education learner very tiring at times. He works long hours and finds it difficult to keep up with his studies. As a very good student with a proven track record, and as a graduate from a disadvantaged background, William is disillusioned at not being able to find employment in his field of expertise. He has joined many other Unisa graduates working as in a variety of environments as cashiers or temporary workers. When he applied for the job as a marketing officer, he realised that it was not something he ever contemplated of doing, but felt compelled to apply just to find permanent employment.

Although single, William has a commitment to marry the mother of his child. At present he has to provide for them according to their cultural practices. Although critical of his cultural background and the demands his culture places on him as a man and as a provider, he tries to comply as best as possible.

Contrary to his hopes that being an excellent student would find him employment as well enable him to obtain the other luxuries promised by a capitalist society, William has found his employment to provide for only his basic necessities and nothing. More, although he remains hopeful that some day he will be in a position to afford all the trappings the advertising industry is promising a population with an unemployment rate of forty percent. The Unisa Tuition Policy envisages critical and independent graduates who play their respective roles as critical citizens. Hountondji (2000:40) maintains that although African governments have changed since the colonial era, African universities have continued to produce graduates for the civil service in these countries, resulting in universities that "have become huge factories of a product anonymous fifteen years ago: the unemployment of cadres of learned people. There is an increasing gap between the curricula and the level of knowledge and know-how required by the new job market". With South Africa's present unemployment rate of forty percent, the job market's requirements are much more complex than many graduates expect.

How many degrees must one have to be "employable"? While white graduates have to deal with the implications of affirmative action programmes, what are the reasons our black graduates do not find employment? Cornel West (1993:14) describes the terrible nihilism that permeates black communities in America as "the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important)(sic) lovelessness". While the government, institutions of higher learning and a capitalist society promise a better life for all, it may be that the "critical independent graduates" Unisa produces disappear as anonymous statistics in a nihilistic nightmare.

ADDRESSING THE IDENTIFIED ASSUMPTIONS

The assumptions (as stated in the beginning) that function as "glue" (Brookfield 1990:177) in supporting Unisa's learning package could be addressed as follows:

- The notion of the independent and autonomous learner in distance education will have to be revisited. No individual is completely independent or autonomous. Although the Unisa Tuition Policy strives to produce 'independent' learners, interdependence is a skill and a value needed in society. Furthermore - South African universities cannot expect independent and autonomous learners to emerge from a schooling system which largely teaches them dependence and uncritical acceptance of authority.
- The academics at Unisa are undoubtedly subject specialists, but not all of them are good teachers and it seems that many of them do not have a clear understanding of the uniqueness of distance education and the unique needs of many distance education learners. Many of the academics have been recruited from traditional residential, face-to-face institutions and therefore compose study guides which, while they may be good, "content-driven" learning experiences, may not be well suited to a distance education environment or the needs of the South African society.
- At Unisa, teaching often focuses on the content and in the delivery of the content. Once it has been delivered, teaching is considered to have taken place. In the Middle Eastern languages, the verb "to teach" can be translated as meaning "to cause to learn". This implies that teachers have an inherent responsibility to "cause learning". Although the academic standard of the content in Unisa's courses is indisputable, this does not necessarily constitute good teaching or good distance teaching. Most often the content is "dumped" on learners and it is their responsibility to internalise it.
- Academic and administrative support at Unisa is still seen as an "add-on" to good content and not an integral part of the learning package. Study guides are written with content as its main aim, with support provided through a tutorial letter, by referring learners to join tutorial classes (for which they have to pay extra) or by encouraging learners to consult an advisor at the Bureau for Student Counselling and Career Development. Academic support that enhances the learning experience and is imbedded in the study material is not yet a reality.
- Even with the exciting possibilities of the technological era, print-based material and learning packages remains the major mode of delivery for the Unisa learner. Taking into account the geographical and socioeconomic circumstances of our learners, we

will have to change the way our delivery of study material and correspondence works. The delay in the delivery of study material is not just a temporary constraint to learners in the rural areas, but a major factor in jeopardising learners' efforts. While the inclusion of audio cassettes and CD-Roms can enhance the learning experience, we should not assume that all learners know how to use them, nor that they have the necessary access to the equipment needed.

- The socioeconomic circumstances of many learners means that the additional cost of prescribed books will have to be examined creatively. Other options include compiling cost-effective readers containing the latest information, and expanding learners' access to such books and readers in the Unisa libraries.
- While assignments at Unisa on first year level are, to a large extent, no longer compulsory to gain admission to the examinations, assessment of the learners' internalisation of the learning experience should be revisited. For those subjects in which assignments are still compulsory, the opportunity for dialogue between learner and lecturer should be fully exploited. Furthermore, compulsory assignments in the first months of the year should be appropriate the learners' stage of the learning experience, and should be more accessible and more manageable than later assignments. Compilers of the assignments should also be critically aware of the life world and world views and background of our learners.
- In the light of the national emphasis on science and technology, as well as the increasing number of learners who register for computer courses, the number of Computer Microlab facilities nationally will have to be increased. One possibility is to make optimal use of the large number of former teachers' colleges or other community centres.
- Although the plight of the female learner, especially in the rural and more traditional societies of South Africa, needs to be researched and addressed, the unique role of young male learners in their respective societies and communities should be kept in mind.
- An alarming number of learners are graduating with degrees that are not viable in the marketplace. Many academic departments strive to attract learners in creative ways in order to survive; however, attention should also be given to teaching skills to enable learners to survive. A realistic institutional audit is needed to evaluate programmes, degrees and courses for their relevance to national needs. In addition, career counselling should not only serve as a starting point for first-time learners, but should intervene continually during and upon completion of learners' studies.

CONCLUSION

Six stories. Six sketchy accounts of learners living both in the second most poor and illiterate province as well as in an industrial and educational hub of South Africa. These learners, as Shakespeare states in *Macbeth*, would like to believe that their future is not determined by the stars, but by their choices. However, many of their choices and much of their lives are shaped by factors external to their choices. One of their choices was to study through Unisa – one of the eleven mega universities of the world. Unisa claims to take the distance out of distance education and tacitly promises learners a better life in a "learning society". The danger exists, however, that our students become statistics symbolising broken and misdirected promises.

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