

# Conceptual foundations for critical reasoning and learner engagement in ODL

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## Abstract

The current production and delivery systems in distance education in South Africa lead to a lack of learner support, alienation, and a growing absence of engagement in the teaching and learning experience. This pedagogical style impacts negatively on sound teaching approaches and the quality of curriculum design. In the light of the above, this article reflects critically on the theoretical principles underlying some teaching approaches in open and distance learning (ODL). It argues that an awareness of the role and effect of consumer discourse on teaching approaches and practices is important, because this epistemology of production could obstruct creative learning environments. The article follows a social re-constructivist approach, grounded in a postmodern epistemological view of knowledge creation enriched by diverse perspectives. It attempts to redevelop a culture of critical engagement by adopting a teaching and learning approach that will promote critical discourse and creative thinking, and enable learners to critically question dominant discourses and ideologies, although these are still endorsed by most South African higher education institutions (HEIs) and promoted by many university lecturers in ODL.

## INTRODUCTION

The objective of this article is to explore the conceptual foundations for teaching and learning critical reasoning in an open and distance learning (ODL) environment. It reflects critically on the principles underpinning a social re-constructivist approach to teaching critical reasoning and learner engagement in an ODL context. The article emphasises that tertiary ODL needs to change, not only its industrialised delivery system but, especially, its teaching approach in order to support creative learning environments. Within this context, the article aims to develop a culture of critical discourse and learner engagement by adopting

a teaching and learning approach that will enable learners to critically question dominant discourses and ideologies that are still endorsed by most South African higher education institutions (HEIs) and promoted by many university lecturers.

The article follows a social re-constructivist approach, grounded in a postmodern epistemological view of knowledge creation enriched by diverse perspectives. The author of this article maintains that an awareness of the role and effect of consumer discourse on teaching approaches and practices is important when reflecting upon current teaching approaches, because an epistemology of production could jeopardise the principles underlying these approaches. Moreover, such an epistemology could obstruct creative learning environments.

In the light of the above, the article reflects critically on theoretical principles underlying some teaching approaches in ODL. It proposes an approach to teaching and learning based on the view that knowledge is open-ended and fluid. From this pedagogical approach of knowledge as open critical enquiry, the author derives a set of principles that are reflected in the curriculum design of critical reasoning.

In addition, the article discusses some pedagogical interventions made in the author's teaching of critical reasoning at a prominent South African ODL institution. These interventions are informed by the core principle of open-mindedness to differing views and identity formations. The author believes that these pedagogical interventions effectively improve teaching and learning critical reasoning in an ODL context, thus bringing closer the author's goal of creating a quality learning environment of active learner engagement.

## **A NEED FOR CHANGE IN DISTANCE EDUCATION DELIVERY**

Before discussing the social re-constructionist approach to teaching and learner engagement in ODL, the author briefly explores the implications of an industrialised distance delivery system on the quality of teaching and learning so as to address the need for change in distance education (DE).

At the 2010 National Association for Distance Education and Open Learning (NADEOSA) Conference a number of papers addressed the issue of bad teaching and learning practice in higher DE in South Africa. Concern was raised about a lack of communication, learner support and low throughput rates.

Responding to this concern, recent research in the field of delivery systems and teaching practices in DE has explored the reasons for this pedagogical condition. Researchers, such as O'Riley (2003), Kizito (2004), Gough (2006) and Heydenrych (2009), emphasise that there is a growing absence of involvement in the learning experience, which, in turn, impacts negatively on the quality of teaching and learning.

In identifying the reasons for this state of affairs, Heydenrych's (2009) research is especially relevant as he tries to expose the origin of such delivery practice in national DE. He investigates the effect of organisational discourse and identity on engagement in DE delivery. He also questions why the majority of educators tend not to interact more constructively with their learners. Following a critical discourse analysis methodology, he points out that the interactive performance of DE educators is restrained by a discourse that has its origin in a delivery culture of industrial production and 'managed non-engagement' (Heydenrych 2009, 22). He says: 'In an industrial production and delivery culture, learners receive learning packages as passive receivers of knowledge, resulting in an increasing distance developing between those who author and produce the materials, and the learners themselves' (Heydenrych 2009, 19). This leads to alienation and a culture of non-engagement in the learning experience.

Drawing on the research of critical discourse analysts, such as Liefoghe (2003), Dick (2004) and Slembrouck (2004), Heydenrych (2009) explains how organisational discourse influences activity in a DE delivery context, shapes the educator and, in turn, supports the status quo. He refers to the discourse of industrial production and delivery as a 'systems discourse' supported by 'managerial ideologies' promoting organisational terminologies like costs, budgets and subsidies (Heydenrych 2009, 34). A case in point is a road show on quality assurance presented at a recent Bosberaad of the Department of Philosophy and Systematic Theology (held at the Intundla Game Lodge, Pretoria, 11–12 October 2010). While the focus of the presentation was on quality assessment and quality assurance of courses, the criteria used to measure quality were those of an industrialised delivery system, namely: costs, high risk factors, sustainability, success rate and market value.

In the case of DE educators' adoption and internalisation of this discourse, Heydenrych (2009, 29–33) exposes two different repetitive performances (repertoires) of discourse that contribute to a forced culture of non-engagement. The first repertoire 'supports the system' by 'buying into it'. Educators from this group use the nature and economies of the delivery system to justify and perform limited interaction and communication with learners. They use the lack of time, large number of learners and the semester system as motivation to support their claim that they battle to communicate with learners. In addition, they claim that the system does not reward their efforts of engagement with learners and no recognition is given for innovative teaching strategies. The second repertoire tries to 'beat the system' by 'doing the right thing', that is, putting in extra time, effort and resources to interact with and support learners by receiving assignments via e-mail; giving relevant and constructive feedback on assignments; and dealing

with all learner queries. According to Heydenrych (2009, 32), system discourse does not easily 'infiltrate their [educators'] work to make them passive'.

Heydenrych (2009) remains doubtful whether this repertoire would seriously challenge institutional practice, because the adaptation process of both groups has reproduced dominant ideologies in this unique delivery environment. As Heydenrych (2009, 33) explains: 'The system is either making this not worthwhile or it is somewhat threatening in its power processes. From this perspective the system does not completely destroy commitment with educators, but prevents any alternative discourse from surfacing or making significant noise'.

On this point, the author of this article disagrees with Heydenrych (2009). Is it really the case that the system has the jurisdiction to prevent any alternative discourse from emerging or making significant change? Are there not copious examples in history of social and political resistance from organised groups challenging hegemonic discourses and ultimately changed organisational systems, ideological constructs and regimes? Readers only have to remember the French revolution in 1789; the Russian revolution in 1917; the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s (a literary movement among Afro-Americans to restore and reclaim the image and dignity of black people in America and globally); the Stonewall Riots in 1969 (sparked by a group of homosexuals who fought against police violence and governmental surveillance, societal discrimination and oppression to reclaim their human rights); the anti-apartheid struggle that eventually changed the ideology of apartheid; and so on. These are all examples of social and political resistance against dominant ideologies as a result of serious critical questioning of discursive formations, institutionalised rules and conventions. Considering these historical events, which served as powerful vehicles through which hegemonic discourses and ideological constructs were changed, the author believes that the power relations and processes inherent in the industrialised DE delivery system, discussed earlier, are not impermeable to transformation. As Strickland (1990), Thompson (1990), Ketch (1992), Zavarzadeh and Morton (1994), Apple (1996) and Heydenrych (2009) point out, distance HEIs are currently under pressure to change their delivery systems by redeveloping an inclusive culture of teaching and learning engagement and learner support.

Taking this into account, it stands to reason that tertiary DE needs to change, not only its delivery system but, especially, its teaching approach in order to support creative learning environments. Within this context, the author proposes a teaching and learning approach that will promote critical discourse and creative thinking, and allow learners to critically question dominant ideologies and stereotypical views that are still endorsed by most South African HEIs.

## **RE-CONCEPTUALISING TEACHING AND LEARNING IN ODL: A SOCIAL RE-CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH**

The rules of information and communication technologies and future employment are changing and so should traditional teaching approaches. What employers in commerce, law, industry and the public service are looking for in university candidates are technological literacy skills and diverse social skills of organisation, communication, negotiation, conflict management, adaptability, emotional maturity and critical thinking. When preparing learners for a changing employment market, critical reasoning and argumentation skills are considered by leading business educators (Bryan and Clegg 2006; Chonko and Roberts 1996; Oliver and Utermohlen 1995; Quinones and Ehrenstein; Wolcott and Lynch 2002) as the most important components of higher education.

Moreover, the importance of imparting critical reasoning and argumentation skills is globally recognised as the most important of all educational tasks currently facing educators. The ever-increasing complexity of contemporary discourses; an overload of information from the web and modern communication media; the perplexity of human interactions; and the demands of the workplace require people who can think critically and who can make informed decisions on the basis of sound reasoning.

Although critical reasoning is, to a certain extent, integrated within traditional classroom and correspondence instruction, tertiary ODL is still a long way from supporting creative learning environments in which learners become independent knowledge seekers. Curriculum development experts and business educators (Naidu, Cunningham and Jasen 2002; Steinberg and Kincheloe 2007; Tatnall and Davey 2003) are in agreement that HEIs need to improve their delivery methods in order to support creative learning environments. The question is how can DEs change their teaching approaches and re-conceptualise learning to bring about social change through a pedagogy of critical discourse and learner engagement, while ODL institutions have yet to make the conceptual shift to a culture of interactive teaching and learning support?

Reflecting critically on the theoretical principles underlying teaching approaches is especially important for ODL, because some of its operational styles assumes a pedagogy of consumer production that is supported by an ideology of the marketability of its products. As pointed out earlier, the current production and delivery systems in ODL lead to alienation; a lack of learner support; and a growing absence of engagement in the learning experience. This, in turn, impacts negatively on sound teaching approaches and the quality of curriculum design. This article maintains that supporting a successful ODL process entails the development of sound teaching approaches in DE, while at the

same time taking a critical look at the theoretical principles underpinning these teaching approaches.

The theoretical approach most suited to the perspective of teaching and learning put forward in this article supports a transformative and social re-constructionist perspective.<sup>1</sup> This perspective is grounded in the postmodern epistemological views that knowledge is fluid and meaning is socially constructed; there are no absolute truths; and neither is there only one true and correct view. In fact, knowledge is seen as an open enterprise that is enriched by diverse perspectives. On this reasoning, truth is always relative to some particular frame of reference or conceptual scheme, such as a culture or a world view. This perspective stands in contrast to epistemological foundationalism,<sup>2</sup> which argues that knowledge is predetermined and founded on unquestionable principles, such as the Creed of the Church, the Word of God or the Laws of Nature. In the author's opinion, this view is fundamentalist, and without quarrel.

The author of this article aims to suggest a pedagogical approach to teaching and learning that would support a creative learning environment in which learners are encouraged to critically question enforced unexamined beliefs and ideological constructions. This approach is mostly based on the philosophical insights of Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997), Michel Foucault (1926–1984) and Richard Rorty (1931–2007).

Berlin (1997, 303) refers to transcendent knowledge and the belief in absolute truths as 'the crooked timber of humanity'. He emphasises that people should be critical of the idea of the existence of objective knowledge and universal truths. Berlin (1997, 303) proclaims: '[to] confuse our own constructions with eternal laws or divine decrees is one of the most fatal delusions of men'. The belief in objective knowledge and absolute truths is an illusion because 'the concept of fact is itself problematic ... all facts embody theories ... or socially conditioned, ideological attitudes' (Berlin 1999, 89). Here Berlin challenges the idea of a single meaning of reality and suggests that meanings are socially constructed. Berlin's views on knowledge and truth concur with the positions of Foucault and Rorty.

For Foucault (1984, 333), 'a domain of knowledge ... with its own concepts, theories, diverse disciplines ... is a collection of rules ... which differentiate the permissible from the forbidden, natural from pathological, what is decent from what is not'. Foucault urges people to question those discursive practices that circumscribe, constitute and regulate their identities. These discursive formations characterised by rules and conventions are always themselves

reflexive categories, principles of classification, normative rules, institutionalized types: they, in turn, are facts of discourse that deserve to be analyzed beside others;

of course, they also have complex relations with each other, but they are not intrinsic, autochthonous, and universally recognizable characteristics. (Foucault 2004, 91).

Foucault encourages people to analyse the relationship between knowledge and power in order to understand the process whereby meanings are socially, politically and pedagogically constructed. Concordant with the article's aim to challenge traditional notions of teaching and learning, Foucault's insights spur readers towards alternative ways of reconstructing the curriculum and re-conceptualising learning.

Rorty (1989), in turn, challenges the conventional notions that truth is 'out there' and that knowledge is true, justified belief. According to Rorty (1989, 5), justification is relative and he says:

Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. ... To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations.

The implication of Rorty's views on knowledge and truth is that there are no externally true meanings that can be located in an objective reality. In real-world contexts – and contexts are always ubiquitous in the real world – meanings result from social experiences in a large, and forever expandable, web of relations. A domain of knowledge is, thus, a creation of human beings and not predetermined in accordance with fundamental truths and unquestionable principles.

Using the Rortian approach, an open-ended and empowering pedagogy can be implemented by recognising that people from diverse cultures do not share a common world view. Thus, justification of knowledge claims and truth-values is context-bound; justification is not absolute, but is always justification to and by an audience who have differing word views and diverse perspectives.

In view of the preceding epistemological views of knowledge as open-ended and fluid, it is the author's belief that the time has come to reflect seriously upon the principles underlying current teaching approaches in ODL. To a large extent, these approaches still emphasise the lecturer's role as the authoritative mentor and conveyor of knowledge, while learners are seen as passive receivers of knowledge. If knowledge is fluid and all facts embody theories and ideological constructs, it stands to reason that the conventional approach to teaching as the transmission of established values, beliefs and pre-determined knowledge needs to be re-conceptualised.

This is especially critical considering the actuality that the general operational style of industrialised ODL in present-day South Africa is driven by an ideology of

consumer production and the marketability of its products. As mentioned earlier, this production and delivery system of non-engagement reflects negatively on the quality of teaching and learner success (Apple 1996; Heydenrych 2009; Thompson 1990); contributes to a lack of engagement in and commitment to the teaching and learning experience; and leads to alienation between educators and learners (Heydenrych 2009). This, in turn, impacts negatively on sound teaching approaches and the quality of curriculum design.

The social re-constructionist perspective *à la* postmodern theorists sees teaching and learning as open and flexible activities, rather than a process of text delivery and reception. In line with this perspective, the article supports a teaching approach that is informed by the principle of open-mindedness to differing perceptions and identity formations. This entails that people all have different perspectives and diverse understandings of the world; they do not share a common world view. Ignoring, or even suppressing, this human situation devalues people's creativity and critical reasoning capacities and jeopardises human interaction and services, including the teaching and learning process.

This approach sees learners as subjects who are capable of critically questioning dominant ideologies and thus focuses on learners' empowerment and self-transformation. The author believes that the capacity to act upon social incongruities is the essential constituent of empowerment and intelligent teaching and learning. People's sets of values and beliefs are rooted in cultural conditioning, but these beliefs and values are always susceptible to further evaluation and critical inquiry.

At the same time, the author contends that a critical attitude towards socio-cultural structures is not enough for self-transformation to take place. Critical thinking is a process in which inherent reasoning faculties are refined over a life-long period. Accordingly, the development of critical reasoning skills, such as evaluating arguments, unearthing false assumptions and exposing stereotypes serves as a start-up generator for self-transformation.

The author's position is based on the assumption that thinking cannot be divorced from the impact of social structures, roles and norms on people's beliefs, values and identities. But this does not mean that thinking, especially critical thinking, cannot overcome the limitations of cultural conditioning and 'systems discourse' (Heydenrych 2009, 33), which dominates people's social interactions and power relations.

Therefore, self-transformation occurs when learners are able to recognise that knowledge claims are not set, but always open to further evaluation and developed by diverse perspectives. This means that learners are able to think independently and to arrive at their own conclusions instead of being indoctrinated and manipulated by stereotypical beliefs and pre-determined knowledge claims.

Empowerment occurs when learners are able to challenge wrong-headed beliefs and social constructs that promote authoritarianism, patriarchy and gender inequalities by offering well-informed and reasoned alternatives. This involves creative thinking about established knowledge claims by looking at the world in fresh new ways, considering other possibilities and different options in order to change social injustices.

The pedagogical approach to teaching critical reasoning in an ODL environment, outlined above, can serve as the basis for a set of principles. Table 1 provides a list of these principles and contrasts them with the traditional ‘transmission’ approach:

**Table 1:** A social re-constructionist approach versus the traditional transmission approach

| <b>Social re-constructionist approach</b>  | <b>Outcomes</b>  | <b>Transmission approach</b>   | <b>Outcomes</b>   |
|--|--|--|---|
| (1) Supports a pedagogy of learner support.  | (a) Increases learner engagement and promotes inclusivity.   | (1) Promotes a pedagogy of consumer production.                                  | (a) Leads to alienation, lack of learner support and absence of learner engagement.   |
| (2) Perspective of knowledge creation and emphasis on quality of teaching and learning material. | (b) Promotes sound teaching approaches and delivery methods.   | (2) Promotes an ideology of marketability of its learning material.              | (b) Impacts negatively on sound teaching approaches and delivery methods.   |
| (3) Knowledge is seen as open-ended and enriched by diverse perspectives.                        | (c) Learning requires active intellectual engagement from learners and leads to independent thinking.  | (3) Knowledge is seen as predetermined and founded on unquestionable principles. | (c) Learning is a passive process and leads to rote learning.   |
| (4) Supports a creative learning environment.  | (d) Learners are encouraged to critically question enforced unexamined beliefs and ideological constructions. This leads to the promotion of critical discourse and learner empowerment. | (4) Supports an industrialised learning environment.                             | (d) Learners are expected to reproduce existing knowledge claims, informed by established norms and values. This stifles creative and independent thinking and leads to indoctrination of stereotypical beliefs and values. |

|   |  |   |   |
|---|--|---|---|
| (5) Teaching and learning are informed by the principle of open-mindedness to differing perspectives and identity formations. | (e) Promotes the idea of diversity, flexibility and creativity and aims to develop learners' critical reasoning capacities.  | (5) Teaching and learning is a process of text delivery and reception.                | (e) Devalues creativity and critical enquiry and jeopardises human interaction.   |
| (6) Learners are seen as subjects who are capable of critically questioning dominant ideologies.                              | (f) Encourages learners to critically question cultural conditioning and to act upon social incongruities.   | (6) Learners are seen as objects who absorb and reflect established knowledge claims. | (f) Discourages critical enquiry and promotes authoritarianism.   |
| (7) Focuses on learners' empowerment and self-transformation.   | (g) Learners are encouraged to think independently, arrive at their own conclusions and to challenge wrong-headed beliefs. This leads to learner engagement in the learning experience and encourages learners to consider new possibilities in order to change social injustices. | (7) Focuses on the authority of lecturers and textbooks.                              | (g) Leads to the indoctrination of learners by stereotypical beliefs and predetermined knowledge claims. It stifles independent and creative thinking and jeopardises social and intellectual transformation. |

## PEDAGOGICAL INTERVENTIONS

It is the task of critical reasoning practitioners to encourage learners to become critical and creative thinkers on their path to self-discovery and empowerment. As a result, the author has initiated pedagogical changes with the aim of transforming the conventional method of correspondence instruction. These pedagogical interventions reflect the principles underpinning the social re-constructionist perspective discussed above. The study guide for the module on critical reasoning was revised at the end of 2009 with the assistance of the Directorate for Learning and Curriculum Design at the University of South Africa (Unisa). In the curriculum design due cognisance was taken of the principles underlying a social re-constructionist approach to teaching and learning. The author's pedagogical interventions were as follows:

1. The printed study guide, which is also available online, and the prescribed book for the module on critical reasoning are used as a start-up supportive

guide rather than the final word on the subject. The author explains to learners that he/she will act as their coach to guide them on their journey of critical reasoning and self-transformation. This intervention supports the idea of learner engagement and support. It promotes the idea that textbooks and lecturers are not the authorities or the only possessors of knowledge. It respects students as adult learners and central participants in the process of creating their own meanings.

2. Learners are invited to get involved in their own learning experience and to participate in discussions and self-reflection activities. Their involvement is not limited to the study guide and the textbook: learners are also encouraged to share and explore their ideas, opinions and experiences online with their fellow learners through *myUnisa*, an online facility available for learners enrolled at Unisa. This educational change is based on the principle that learning best takes place through social interactions rather than the traditional one-way method of knowledge transmission through textbooks. Social interaction with fellow thinkers gives learners the opportunity to reflect upon their own limited views and to examine them against the backdrop of alternative views. The principle reflected here is that knowledge is seen as open-ended and enriched by diverse perspectives, rather than predetermined or founded on unquestionable principles.
3. A mix of media is used to explain to learners the impact of social conditioning on people's thoughts, perceptions and behaviour, including: textbook explanations, pictures, activities, a DVD, the use of a journal by learners and online discussions through *myUnisa*. Learners are especially encouraged to exchange ideas and share their experiences with their fellow learners. This transcends the monologue of the printed text and creates an interactive learning environment, in which learners are encouraged and challenged to engage critically with their own preconceived ideas and stereotypes. The author believes that this approach is far more effective than a textbook definition of preconceived ideas and cultural conditioning. The underlying principle of this approach is that learners should be actively engaged in building their own individual knowledge instead of passively reproducing 'objective' knowledge. It supports a creative learning environment and promotes critical discourse and learner empowerment.
4. Activities are included in the study guide, which challenge learners to examine their own assumptions and preconceived ideas, for example: Learners are asked to consider some pictures and then, in their journal, write down their thoughts about these pictures. These pictures are controversial enough to stir

up debate and critical reflection, for example, a white woman holding two black babies in her arms running away from a hut that is on fire; two men kissing; a drag queen; a demagogue; and so on. These pictures are also posted on *myUnisa* and learners are invited to discuss their responses online with fellow thinkers by considering a number of questions, such as: ‘What do you see?’, ‘What do you think influenced the way you perceived the images?’, ‘Which economic class does each of them belong to?’, ‘Which gender “category” does each of them belong to?’, ‘Do you think that the people in the pictures are violent? Why? Why not?’. The principle reflected here is that learners are seen as subjects who are capable of critically questioning dominant ideologies. The aim is to encourage learners to critically question cultural conditioning and to act upon social incongruities.

5. Learners are invited to initiate discussions on ‘how social conditioning affects our thoughts and ‘the way we see things differently’ on *myUnisa* by considering further questions, such as: ‘Did you label or stereotype the persons in your responses?’, ‘If you used stereotyping and labelling, do you think it was the result of social conditioning and even a defence against discomfort or fear?’, ‘Do you want everyone to be like you?’, ‘But who are you and whom do you represent?’. The purpose of this activity is to make learners aware of the fact that people’s sets of values and beliefs are rooted in cultural conditioning, and that these beliefs, values and discourses are always susceptible to further evaluation and critical inquiry. This opens a doorway for learners to foster a critical attitude and open-mindedness to differing perceptions (which is not the same as blind acceptance) and identity formations. It promotes the idea of diversity, flexibility and creativity and aims to develop learners’ critical reasoning capacities.
6. Learners are encouraged to start a debate on the viability of the module on critical reasoning on the discussion forum on *myUnisa*. If they do not have access to online facilities, they are invited to discuss the issue with members of their family or even a social group. As part of their debate about the curriculum, they are asked to also consider the following questions: ‘What did you gain from your studies in critical reasoning?’, ‘What would you like to change about the module?’, ‘How did critical reasoning help you to become aware of your wrong-headed beliefs?’, ‘Have your preconceived ideas been challenged?’, ‘How has critical reasoning changed your perception of the world, other people and yourself?’. The purpose of this activity is to allow for learners’ perspectives and interpretations that differ from and challenge the canon and existing knowledge paradigms. This pedagogical intervention

focuses on learners' empowerment and self-transformation. Learners are encouraged to think independently, arrive at their own conclusions and to challenge wrong-headed beliefs. This leads to learner engagement in the learning experience.

7. The objectives of the activities are explained to the learners in the study guide so as to guide their thinking and learning experience. This helps them to understand what is expected of them and to compare their responses to the outcomes of the module.
8. As a future pedagogical intervention, the author will publish the pedagogical interventions and the list of principles, discussed above, online on *myUnisa* and in follow-up tutorial letters. This will serve as a vehicle through which learners could make sense of the rationale of the learning material and involve them in the teaching and learning experience.

It is believed that these interventions will effectively improve teaching and learning critical reasoning in an ODL context, while at the same time serving as a catalyst for learners to become independent thinkers and knowledge-seekers. To substantiate this claim, a student evaluation of the revised study guide for the module on critical reasoning, which reflects the principles of a social reconstructionist approach to teaching and learning, is needed.

## THE VOICE OF THE LEARNER

In view of the fact that the revised module on critical reasoning was introduced in 2010, a questionnaire has been designed to elicit feedback from learners on the quality, presentation and delivery method of the module. The questionnaire was handed out to learners in March and September 2011 during class discussions in Pretoria, Durban and Cape Town. The questionnaire will serve as a tool for critical feedback from learners so as to make their voices heard (see Table 2).

**Table 2:** The envisaged questionnaire

| <p><b>Statements on the quality, presentation and delivery method of the module on critical reasoning</b><br/> <b>Example:</b> The module on critical reasoning supports a creative learning environment.<br/>                     Rating:    <b>1   2   3   4   5</b></p> | <p><b>Rating on a scale from 1 to 5</b><br/>                     (1 = poor; 2 = sub-standard; 3 = average; 4 = good; 5 = excellent)</p> |
|--|---|
| <p>The study guide invites and assists me to actively engage in the learning material.</p>   | <p>1   2   3   4   5</p>  |

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| The module on critical reasoning is interactive and involves me in the learning experience through a variety of media, i.e. textbook explanations, pictures, activities, exercises, a DVD, the use of a journal, a glossary, group discussions and myUnisa discussions. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| The module on critical reasoning provides me with sufficient opportunities to exchange ideas and share my experiences with fellow students.   | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| The module on critical reasoning conveys the idea that knowledge is open-ended and enriched by diverse perspectives.  | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| The module on critical reasoning respects me as an adult learner and a central participant in the process of creating my own meanings.  | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| The study material requires intellectual engagement from me.  | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| The study material encourages me to think independently and to arrive at my own conclusions.  | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| The module on critical reasoning helps me to foster a critical attitude and open-mindedness to differing views.   | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| The activities and discussions in the study guide and on myUnisa challenge me to engage critically with my own preconceived ideas and stereotypes.  | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| What would you like to change about the module on critical reasoning?<br>_____<br>_____   |           |

Learners were asked to rate aspects of the teaching and learning material as well as the module on critical reasoning on a scale from 1 to 5, by encircling the appropriate number. The sample groups consisted of learners in Pretoria, Durban and Cape Town who attended class discussions during March and September 2011. In addition, during July 2011 the questionnaire was sent to all learners enrolled for the critical reasoning module. The analysis of learner responses to the questionnaire will be published on *myUnisa* and included in a follow-up tutorial letter to learners enrolled for the module. The analysis of this questionnaire could serve as a springboard for further research on curriculum development in the field of critical reasoning, and could be reworked into research articles on teaching approaches in ODL.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of HEIs should be to promote learners' empowerment and self-transformation, instead of serving as a platform for instruction and the recycling of customary discourses. This article has suggested a transformed teaching strategy based on the premises that knowledge is socially constructed and that truth is always relative to a particular conceptual scheme. Based on this reasoning, terrains of knowledge are always human creations and any justification of knowledge claims is always justification to and by an audience who have diverse perspectives. Transforming the traditional delivery system thus involves re-conceptualising teaching and learning so as to promote a culture of critical discourse, in which learners are seen as adult individuals capable of critical reflection on their paths to self-discovery and self-transformation. This is the starting point for nurturing the critical reasoning generation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This research will possibly initiate research into other aspects of principles underpinning teaching and learning approaches in ODL in order to create a quality learning environment of active learner engagement. It can also make a substantial contribution to a pedagogy of learner support and creative learning environments, which supports the idea of diverse perspectives and intellectual engagement from learners.

## NOTES

1. Proponents of this view include Paul Feyerabend (1993), Joseph Margolis (1995), Richard Rorty (1989) and Isaiah Berlin (1990).
2. Advocates of this approach include Paul Boghossian (2000), Larry Laudan (1995), Richard Dawkins (2001) and Pope John Paul II (1996).

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