CHAPTER 7

Spiralling out: Increasing awareness through experience

7.1 Introduction

The experience and feedback from the pilot delivery provided valuable insights as to the preparedness and readiness of Unisa teaching staff to facilitate online courses. The learning development process as explained in Chapter 6 supported a unique inclusive team approach. In response to these results, and as an attempt to take the commitments of the action research process forward into the wider institution, an ‘awareness course’ was developed to assist academic and support staff to familiarise themselves with the potential of the Internet and with the new teaching paradigm that should be adopted. This chapter provides more information on the awareness course itself as well as some feedback from the first group of participants on the pilot delivery.

7.2 Becoming critical through hands-on experience

The best school to prepare teachers for online facilitation is online experience itself. It was decided that the best staff training would be in the form of an online course so that prospective teachers would be able to experience what they were going to practice. For Harasim (1995, p. 162) a prospective teacher ideally begins as a guest observer in an online course taught by a peer.

With this advice in mind, the researcher initiated a staff training course ‘Sustaining the Online Learning Community’, based on the same structure and commitments as the sample course, that would be available to all future online facilitators at Unisa. From the evidence that was collected through this research project, it was
clear that future online teaching staff should understand Internet communication technologies, and would have to become critical of current teaching practice in order to successfully adopt their new roles. Davies (1978, p. 24) had the following to say about such a point of departure:

Educators devoting themselves to technology, however it is conceived, without a sense of distinctive purpose, can never be more than second-class citizens. Educators, on the other hand, who devote themselves to technology, with a conception of criticism, evaluation or reflection as the basic theory, place educational technology in its proper light as having a central rather than peripheral role in matters of educational concern.

The following image displays the course home page of the online course environment:
7.2 A curriculum for awareness

The curriculum is divided into three parts consisting of eleven topics. Participants are provided with access to resources, but are also required to find resources on the Internet and to share them with the course community. In order to extend the content and to make participants used to exploring the WWW for additional resources, Extension Activities are added to the different sections.

The following images shows examples of such extension activities:
Part I: Internet communication technologies

This part of the course is aimed at exposing participants to the potential of the Internet to provide resources, enhance communication and its suitability as a technology for distance education.

Topic 1: A history of convergence

Going online with teaching and learning in the higher education environment is largely a result of information communication technologies which have developed very quickly. Global economic markets are changing rapidly; the market place, therefore, requires employees to have very specific skills and knowledge. Higher education institutions are faced with the challenge of utilising new communication technologies to support face-to-face education or to deliver distance education in
an innovative way. This topic is about the convergence of three social and technical developments: distance learning, computer-conveyed education and Internet communication technologies.

**Topic 2: The potential of Internet technologies**

We find ourselves in a global community of people, interacting in a virtual environment and independent of time and place. Connectivity, community, communication and interaction are essential characteristics of the online community as they are in direct contrast with characteristics of correspondence courses and remote classrooms. Computer-conveyed education, such as CAI (computer assisted instruction) and CBT (computer based training) have been greatly enhanced by global connectivity through the Internet and the sharing of resources on the WWW. Learners can interact (independently) with a piece of software and they can discuss topics in forums (or chatrooms), either asynchronously (at different times) or synchronously (at the same time). Learners can read and comment on the topics under discussion at their leisure. For this reason, distance education and open learning programmes adopted computer networking and conferencing media to enhance communication between the learner and the tutor, and to explore a new option for distance education, namely, collaborative learning, that is, learning which involves group projects and discussion between distance learners (Harasim 1995, p. 10).

Although collaborative learning looks promising, distance education institutions may still grab the idea of online learning and communication for the wrong reasons, that is, that institutions may dump correspondence-based material online or let learners download and play existing CBT modules. This leads to Horton’s (2000, p. 6) allegation that "whenever any new technology comes along, we seem to spend a decade or so using it exactly the way we did the previous technology. In
hindsight, such mimicry seems stupid or silly. At best, it wastes valuable years that could have seen innovation and growth.”

This topic introduced staff to the potential of Internet technologies to enhance communication in the learning environment.

**Topic 3: ‘Activating’ learning**

Merely providing content without exploiting the available resources, communication and collaboration, is not a very useful way of applying information communication technologies to enhance online learning. The challenge, therefore, is to purposefully match the different types of activities with different technologies in the learning experience in order to "activate" them.

Harasim (1995, p. 29) views active learning as a major outcome of learning networks. "Attendance" in a learning network activity requires and enables active input. Active learning within the online learning community is more than pressing keys; it is a social and cognitive engagement where participation is based on making input, responding to peers and sharing ideas. The asynchronous classroom (which allows time for reflection and input) is always open and it encourages reflection and interaction about ideas. Paloff and Pratt (1999, p. 5) cite a recent study which labels the majority of students as concrete-active learners; instructors should, therefore, incorporate active learning techniques to improve learning experiences. Examples of active learning techniques include working collaboratively on assignments, participating in small group discussions, working on group projects, reading and responding to case studies, role playing, interviews and using simulations.

An online learning community means that learning no longer takes place in the traditional classroom; learning activities are now activated in cyberspace. The online educator's task now becomes far more complex in terms of the pedagogical,
social, managerial and technical aspects; online education demands some very different and new responsibilities (Paloff and Pratt 1999, p. 73).

**Topic 4: Structuring online learning initiatives**

Organisations need to ask themselves certain questions in order to structure their online learning efforts and innovations according to their context, audience and economy. Mere experimentation without proper consideration of the context, audience and economy may not lead to long-term success and viability. This topic aims to provide more information on Unisa's efforts in this regard (the learning development process as presented in Chapter 6 formed part of this topic).

**Part II: A new perspective on teaching and learning**

This part aims at making participants critical of the current print-based teaching practice whilst gaining understanding of their new responsibilities in the online learning community

**Topic 5: Correspondence and the OLC**

For two-way constructive communication and interaction to take place, quality DE learning needs to make provision for the personal and social construction of knowledge in an open environment. This is a traditional challenge for correspondence DE, as the issue of geographical distance makes communication logistically difficult. In the case of industrialised production and delivery, the establishment of an industrialised production and delivery environment is the key to the survival of mass DE education institutions.

In order to fully understand the teaching approach needed for the online learning community (OLC), it is important to look at the requirements for quality distance learning and traditional correspondence distance education.

**Topic 6: Considering learning theories**
Institutions of learning are often under strong pressure to implement education technology and this results in a myriad of cases where technology is simply about doing, whereas technology should be about enabling learning. Learning theories explore how learners process information and construct knowledge, and how the learning experience then should be structured to achieve this goal. Educators and learning developers must, therefore, be aware of the most popular learning theories so that they can understand the purpose and needs that technology has to meet. This section explored four popular learning theories with this aim in mind:

- Behaviourism;
- Cognitivism;
- Constructivism;
- Social constructivism.

**Topic 7: New teaching responsibilities**

The educator's tasks within the online learning community have become more complex. According to Palof (1999, p. 73) these tasks focus on the following four different types of responsibilities:

- Social;
- Pedagogical;
- Managerial;
- Technical.

It is important for prospective online teachers or facilitators to familiarise themselves with the responsibilities in these four categories. This section will give a general overview of these responsibilities.

**Topic 8: The role of the teacher**
In building an online learning community, participants move from the traditional classroom or correspondence into cyberspace. The educator enters a totally different reality that demands very different and sometimes new responsibilities. An overview is provided of the educator's new role in the online learning community.

**Part III: Facilitating community and knowledge construction**

This part discusses behaviour in cyberspace, techniques of facilitating knowledge construction (such as weaving and summarising) in asynchronous forums, and course evaluation.

**Topic 9: Behaving in cyberspace**

Learner characteristics may be overlooked when learners and facilitators interact or they may cause conflict which can affect the learning process negatively. Online facilitators need to draw on their skills, facilities and support structures to be able to identify misbehaviour and to identify when opportunities are being abused. This section provides some background on aspects of online behaviour and how the facilitator can address them successfully.

**Topic 10: Sustaining the conversation**

Supporting community and facilitating knowledge construction, while maintaining a conversation as the vehicle, is not an easy task. Although the discussions may often have the "texture" of being successful, participants are often not successfully challenged to construct knowledge – it is a very intense experience for both educators and learners. There are a number of techniques that can be used to foster community and participation, and to make online discussion more successful. This topic addressed some of these techniques and responsibilities.
Topic 11: Evaluation

Quality assurance is important for success. Quality assurance may take the form of learners providing feedback about their experiences in the online learning community, evaluation of the facilitator’s performance and evaluation of the course or learning experience. Facilitation and the structure of the course can be revised relatively quickly after each delivery due to the nature of the technologies used (such revision is not economically viable in correspondence delivery). In this way, facilitators are able to keep their efforts relevant and to revise content and curriculums according to learner feedback.

7.3 Reaching development objectives

As a result of an analysis of the feedback from the core research project (pilot course delivery) the following training objectives were identified:

- To familiarise staff with the potential of Internet communication technologies to enhance learning;
- To foster a critical predisposition towards current teaching practice;
- To familiarise staff with and to commit them to the teaching responsibilities of the online learning community;
- To familiarise staff with online participation and the techniques of facilitating constructive online discussion;
- To become competent in the use of online communication technologies.

Reaching objectives through appropriate assessment

In order to reach these objectives the following three assessment opportunities have been adopted as part of formal assessment in the course:
• A personal journal - personal thoughts on current teaching practice and responsibilities in the online learning community.

• Group discussions - engaging in constructive discussions and making opinions public.

• A well constructed essay - preparing an argument for online delivery from a Unisa perspective.

A personal journal

Evaluation is based on a personal journal aimed at empowerment through self-criticism. Emancipatory knowledge embodies the aim of self-knowledge. Through self-reflection one’s history has to be explored in order to see how it expressed itself in the way one sees oneself, one’s roles and expectations (Mezirow 1981, pp. 3–24). Emancipation is to be obtained from institutional and environmental forces that limit options and rational control over lives – those that seem to have been accepted as beyond one’s control. Educators have to understand themselves as agents as well as products of the history of education and society. They need to be empowered, and emancipated from their learned incapacity.

Look in your own backyard. Look at the institution where you practice and the people with whom you interrelate. A myriad of possibilities is waiting for you! But you must first know your backyard, you must know how you exist in your backyard, and who lives there with you. But, most importantly, think about how you arrived in this back yard, the person you were then, and who you have become. This may help illuminate for you those practices that do not reflect your values. (Brooks-Cathcart n.d.)
Elliott (1993, p. 175) sees the problems of educational change as being addressed in a group of professional peers where they can collaboratively enhance their practice.

During this course staff will be required to think continuously about current practice. Time should be set aside to record reflective activities in a journal. This has to be done with a word processor and has to be submitted electronically at the end of the course with the final assignment electronically. Each reflective activity should not exceed 200 words.
The following are examples of reflective activities:

**REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY 1**

Do you view this history of convergence as a significant phase in the provision of education? Have you made use of the Internet and computer-based instruction in your courses? If your answer is yes, why did you decide to use such delivery technologies? If your answer is no, why not?

**REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY 5**

Which of these tools have you used? How can these tools be used to enhance interaction and collaboration?
REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY 14

Are the terms "content transmission" and "content lecturing" relevant concepts in the social constructivist approach? Is social constructivism a beneficial learning theory for your context? Are the principles of behaviourism and cognitivism still relevant in such a learning environment? Do you think it is possible to develop collaborative learning experiences in a print-based environment? If you look back at activating learning with the help of Internet communication technologies, do you see the potential for collaborative learning?

REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY 15

How prepared are you to accept a "reduction in status" within the learning experience? Is it possible that the demands of this new teaching role can impact negatively on your traditional role as researcher-lecturer?

REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY 29

A number of responsibilities are assigned to facilitators during the different stages. How do these (in the five stages) compare with your correspondence teaching? Are they radically different? Are they very intense? Will you be able to cope with such teaching responsibilities?

Your facilitator for this course will provide you with discussion forums where a number of issues, pertaining to the topics covered in this course, will be discussed. Please evaluate the role played by the facilitator of this course in terms of the responsibilities outlined in this topic.

Continuous online participation

Participants are required to participate regularly in the Student Café, Feedback Forum and course forums regularly. The number and quality of their contributions are be taken into account.
Three course forums are scheduled for two weeks each as part of the learning experience. Three to five topical questions are introduced as discussion threads in the content-related course forums. The following image shows such a threaded discussion from the pilot delivery:

The techniques of weaving and summarising are used to facilitate arguments and knowledge construction. The following are examples from the pilot delivery of such summaries (integrating contributions) and weavings (joining different arguments or highlighting an interesting point in order to take the argument forward) by the facilitator:
Date: Tuesday, 27 August 2002, at 11:56 a.m.

Hi all

Just a few notes to conclude the discussion of the past two weeks. I think it was very productive around benefits of online learning environments.

DJ highlighted the issue of engagement and the role of the facilitator to empower learners. Annelien stressed the issue of initially using some 'human elements' to make learners comfortable and then to continue the conversations via the technologies. Her students communicated more when it was a sustained two-way channel.

And then – if you would allow me – I would like to quote some of Marianna’s comments which summarized the essence of the first part of the course:

- Online learning can provide some elements of interactive learning that face to face learning do not provide, such as:

- Availability of many resources (including the text provided, other online readings, discussions with participants, etc) simultaneously, which enhances the learning experience.

- The asynchronous format of learning, where being absent (to some learners intimidated to participate in group discussions) at certain times of discussions does not hamper learning as one can pick up on the threads and formulate a response when it was convenient.

Online learning enables a learner focussed approach to a larger extent than face to face learning - learner focussed in that diverse ideas, resources, avenues and life constraints are incorporated to help make learning are more engaged experience.

| Return to index | Read previous message | Read next message |
courses which may force non-contribution: "Online courses have a scheduled structure and a more accelerated pace and learners may find this more demanding than they can cope with and burnout is possible". For Mariana the learner becomes the main role player – it takes a lot of motivation to participate and learners may even feel guilty if they don’t contribute regularly. Madge mentions that possibility that the structured nature of the online environment (e-mail and threaded discussions) can be invasive. In reply rif emphasises the importance of nurturing and time to be spent on "coaching" students – the interface finally should be a "friendly" face.

For Daleen, Mariana, Madge and Grif any opportunity to communicate may assist all stakeholders to address problems on a regular basis – but some of our lecturers may have trouble adapting to this new teaching demand as the system does not reward such efforts. Grif agrees that ‘there is no substitute for the educator with a "heart" for his/her students.’ Joann is of the opinion that it will take great effort to get the average Unisa lecturer to the point where s/he is willing to engage in such extensive exercises and change. Joann, Elsabe and Madge are of the opinion that teachers should be assisted to unearth the resources and communication potential of the Internet. Grif adds another challenge – how are we going to massify online learning and support to the same extent as we did with print delivery?

Evaluating teaching practice

Annelien supports a different awareness with learners and a resultant change in teaching practice. Daleen encourage pilot delivery of courses in order to assess all aspects related to the teaching or learning experience. Joann, Madge and Mariana argue for a separation between content and teaching in order to assess the practice of the teacher at Unisa. A contract between the learners and Unisa might assist good teaching practice. Madge adds the ethical dimension to the role of the teacher: ‘I think this can only happen when we abandon the idea of value-free learning/teaching and recognise that in education we a type of power that has to be used for the good of others and will sustain ethical development of persons who can in turn affect the society in which they live.’ The learner contract is once again emphasised by Joann and Grif as an instrument to promote better teaching. But Alice warns that evaluation of teaching practice should proceed carefully and with long term goals in mind – students may also resist of different teaching approaches. Cathy cites experience in inviting learner feedback on her courses – she is supported by Annelien in this regard. It would appear that evaluation of materials and teaching practice is already a useful and positive practice for some teachers.
My reply is that we are improving distance teaching/learning with the help of Internet communication technologies and that our aim is not face-to-face teaching/learning. Face-to-face teaching has its own advantages and limitations.

What is your opinion on these ideas?

Final project

Participants have to argue ‘before the University’s Senate’ in favour of (or against) using the Internet to deliver a course. Firstly, the argument has to be about approval of the online delivery of the course and the possible benefits, and secondly about informing the academic and management communities of Unisa about the responsibilities staff have to accommodate when delivering such a course. Evaluation is based on the presentation of a well-structured and referenced argument of between 2500 and 3000 words.

Recognition

Staff receive a certificate of completion. The course was first delivered as a pilot for research purposes, but was later integrated with the staff development activities of the Human Resources Department at Unisa.

7.4 The supportive structure of the course

Orientating participants

Course participants are familiarised with the course structure and participation requirements through an Orientation section. Pointers and explanations are
provided to all important activities. Technical requirements are also explained as this would facilitate the setting up of workstations (eg browsers).

The following image displays the Orientation section:
Chapter 7: Spiralling out: Increasing awareness through experience

Promoting a social environment:

The Student Café was added in the pilot delivery of the course and participants were asked to introduce themselves to fellow participants. This was successful – one participant was able to participate from Saudi Arabia where she was on research leave.

The following image shows a contribution from the participant in Saudi Arabia:
The participant appreciated the fact that she could feel at home amongst friends although she was residing in a foreign country:

I must say that it's good to read all your discussions and forum messages... really feels like I'm back home...sigh...

Salaam [peace!]

Very early in the pilot course a participant showed his appreciation for the ‘fun way’ in which he could engage in learning. As a senior academic member, and a firm believer in the benefits of online learning, he appreciated the social way in which he could engage with the content and relevant issues. The original message reads as follows:

| Return to index | Read previous message | Read next message |
Date: Wednesday, 31 July 2002, at 1:04 p.m.

This document serves as a summons to one Heydenrych J to appear before the powers that be to answer a charge of trying to belittle something as serious as learning by making it FUN!!

Seriously, I am just trying to introduce myself. I am Dana van der Merwe from the Department of Criminal Law and Procedure (although I really teach Law of Evidence). I am interested in "informatics law" such as computer crime, e-commerce etc. and also in "legal informatics" which to me means using IT to do one's job better (including the teaching of law).

This program sounds like fun! I love the CV's: Daleen in an army colonel's uniform, Alice in a harem outfit in the women's university in far-off Araby. This intro is probably too long already - sorry Japie.

Providing opportunity for continuous feedback

A feedback forum was added to the pilot course environment in order to receive continuous feedback from participants regarding uncertainties. They were also invited to provide the facilitator with their impressions on the course. Participants regularly asked questions and provided solutions themselves for issues related to the course, for example:

Date: Thursday, 1 August 2002, at 10:15 a.m.

Thanks Alice. The tip on reading and responding is useful and I will be using it – once I have read the articles.

Japie’s instructions indicate that a process I could follow is to create a journal folder in which I can then create the files Alice suggested which I can then send to Japie’s e-mail address as an attachment.

Would there be an easier way?
Participants felt a strong sense of cooperation and wanted to discuss issues with fellow students – this reduced the feeling of isolation often experienced in distance education:

| Return to index | Read previous message | Read next message |
| Feedback Forum |

Isoleted??

Date: Monday, 9 September 2002, at 9:14 a.m.

A comment to Japie. I feel a strong sense of isolation during the times in between the discussion forums. The Student Café is not really doing the thing in this regard as I sometimes have a need to discuss something about the course material. Is this the forum to use in this case or am I the only one to feel like that?

| Return to index | Read previous message | Read next message |

Towards the end of the course some participants expressed their feelings regarding their experiences on this course. One participant, who had no prior exposure to online learning or delivery via the Internet and WWW, made the following remarks:

| Return to index | Read previous message | Read next message |
| Feedback Forum |

Re: The final assignment and course feedback

Date: Tuesday, 22 October 2002, at 1:30 p.m.

I totally agree with Mariana – an unsettling experience. In the beginning I thought it would be a joy ride, but that soon became a race against workload and time. Japie thank you for the well prepared course. I found it very interesting and learned a lot. I am sure that most of us who were not familiar with online teaching would like to continue the journey!

The message posted by Grif on the 21st made me wonder – are we not jumping on the bandwagon? How will this fit into the Unisa online scenario? Suppose we will have to see – perhaps 5 years from now we will be proud to say we were the first ones to take this course and see how things have changed then!

If Unisa is going the online way – I think all the staff will have to do this course. Good luck to them!!!
Comments by others, and the course topics as such, made her curious about the way forward with online learning at Unisa. Like most of the other participants, she was somewhat disturbed by the insights gained through this learning experience.

**Scheduling activities**

All course activities are scheduled into 13 full weeks. Study and research time (reading content provided and responding to the journal questions) are separated from course forum participation (each forum has a duration of two weeks) so as to allow sufficient time for already overburdened volunteers on the pilot delivery of the course. Time was also set aside for research and preparation of assignments.

The following image displays the course Schedule:
Providing additional resources

The content provided is supported by four different kinds of additional resources:

- Journal articles (to be requested from the Library in print);
- Online articles (links are provided to these resources on the WWW);
- Recommended books (to be requested from the Library);
- Books (relevant books to be requested from the Library);
- Unisa Library (a link is provided to the Library’s homepage);
- Search engines (links are provided to a number of popular search engines on the WWW in order to facilitate searches for information).

The use of additional resources, especially the ones on the WWW, was encouraged in order for participants to experience the WWW and the Internet as resources.
The following image displays such a resource page with links to relevant online articles:

7.5  Positive feedback

From voluntary feedback (e-mail messages and postings in the Feedback Forum) it was clear that the course had reached its objectives. The course specifically succeeded in stimulating thought on online learning and its commitments and requirements within the Unisa context.

The following are examples of how thinking on online learning and the Unisa context was stimulated:
• Keeping the journal was a discipline and a very worthwhile one because I got a sense of the development of the course and this produced development in my thinking (e-mail, 3/12/02).

• The course was an eye opener to the possibilities of online learning at Unisa (e-mail, 4/12/02).

• The responsibilities of role players became more clear (e-mail, 4/12/02).

• Wanting to learn more about online delivery (e-mail, 4/12/02).

• Even if most of our present students do not have access to the Internet we still need to move in this direction, and quickly because this is how many people, in the global community, want to learn. If we believe our learning experiences are of excellent quality then we need to make them available through online learning. (e-mail, 3/12/02)

• I learned a lot. My interest was stimulated (and I think that is what you wanted) and I hope to do a lot more research in the future on how I can use wonderful technologies in my field (e-mail, 28/10/02)

• It is an unsettling experience. It left me with so many ideas and thought and ideas going all at once. It makes you question aspects that you have taken for granted, system elements that you never thought about. This is a learning journey that I would like to continue. (forum posting, 22/10/02).

• I would strongly encourage all staff to complete this course as this is the future for Unisa (forum posting, 22/10/02).

• The critical questions we will need to start and keep on asking to change the Unisa system towards a more learner and learning focused environment, are mostly addressed and stimulated here (forum posting, 22/10/02).

• If Unisa is going the online way then I think all staff will have to do this course (forum posting, 22/10/02).
The following are examples of how participants found the course an enriching experience:

- Impressed by the way you spurred us on to think of other issues and aspects related to the various topics (e-mail, 3/12/02).
- A very enriching but demanding course (e-mail, 3/12/02).
- I read most of the suggested materials and explored the suggested websites – have a lever arch file filled with new materials. It was time consuming, but necessary as it put me in touch with what others were saying about online learning (e-mail, 3/12/02).

The following is a comment on the facilitation and support provided in the course:

- I want to commend you on the facilitation of the course (e-mail, 3/12/02).

The following are examples of comments concerning asynchronous threaded discussions, interaction and knowledge construction:

- The discussion forums are so helpful, in my case, to get some insight into the understanding of others, but also to realize we can never make the assumption that we share ideas and ideals, just because we work within the same environment/organization. This awareness needs to be promoted and driven (forum posting, 22/10/02).
- The threaded discussions were very thought-provoking (e-mail, 3/12/02) I found that the comments of others sparked new ideas in me and made me want to do more reading and thinking about how I could use what I was learning.
• The course destroys the myth that online teaching doesn’t require interaction with students. The whole point of the course, as I experienced it was that learning takes place in the context of the learning community which is established through the interaction between students and the teacher (e-mail, 3/12/02).

The following are examples on **hands-on experience**:

• The course is worthwhile because it gives lecturers the opportunity to have an experience of online learning and teaching (e-mail, 3/12/02).

The following are examples of comments concerning **the presentation of the course**:

• A really great experience. An awesome amount of information but wonderfully presented. (forum posting, 30/10/02).

• I think the course is very well structured and developed, but it has a lot of text. I would have liked to see some other visual ways to present the material. (e-mail, 3/12/02).

• It was a very heavy program (e-mail, 28/10/02)

By participating in this course staff became aware of the potential of Internet communication technologies to enhance learning. They also supported the commitment to learner support and collaborative construction of knowledge through meaningful interaction. They gained hands-on experience in the use of the vast resources on the WWW. Asynchronous threaded discussion forums were accepted as a meaningful technology to enhance communication and interaction in a group learning environment.
7.6 Conclusion

Action research commits itself to continued outward ‘spiralling’, as described in the above instance. It requires, therefore, that the insights, results and commitments gained from this research be made known to the rest of the academic community in a constructive way in order for the institution to fully benefit from the research. With minor adjustments the course should be made available to all Unisa staff in order firstly to critically assess current practice (with the aim of cross-fertilisation) and secondly to maximise understanding towards successful online delivery.

The awareness course *Sustaining the online learning community* was a first attempt to raise awareness and to increase understanding. By participating online and experiencing the benefits of continuous support and facilitation, staff were able to evaluate their commitment in such a delivery mode as compared with their responsibilities in the traditional print-based delivery environment of Unisa. This paradigm shift, as is deemed necessary from the preceding research, has to occur in order to secure quality online delivery through appropriate use of technologies in the context, as well as new commitments towards teaching and learner-centredness.