CHAPTER 8

Conclusions

8.1 Introduction

This study reported on the implementation of the online learning community in the print-based delivery environment. The success of the online learning community in the Unisa context was established. The teaching responsibilities and commitment in the online community was outlined as against current print-based teaching practice. The current development and production culture, that significantly restricts innovation and change in practice and system, came under pressure and a new development process was established as a result. The following sections provide an assessment of the value and significance of the research. Questions for further research are also listed.

8.2 Summary of the study

Action research methodology was successfully used as the foundation for the development and delivery of the course in Industrial Psychology, and to collaboratively reflect on practice and systems. Departing from a social constructivist learning philosophy, the online learning community was selected as an appropriate environment in which to realise social constructivist learning ideals and to address the requirements and standards of a quality DE learning experience. The development, production and two consecutive deliveries of a sample course, coinciding with two action research cycles, were described.

Sufficient evidence was provided that the learning experience was successful. This was confirmed by pass and retention rates and by learner feedback during interviews. The feedback supported the success of the learning philosophy chosen and learning in a community via a distance. Current print-based teaching practice did not meet the standards of the online learning community.
Teaching, or facilitation, came under pressure as teachers and support staff assessed their practice as being flawed. New teaching responsibilities and techniques were discussed. As a commitment to creating an opportunity to assist staff to gain the necessary awareness and competence to facilitate in the online environment, an online awareness course was developed and piloted with staff. The feedback reported that the desired objectives were reached because staff became more competent with the technologies and gained an awareness of the possibilities and future role of the Internet and WWW in Unisa’s DE context.

The learning development approach, or process, came under pressure for not being inclusive in establishing a critical predisposition with staff. Certain assumptions underpinning a neo-Fordist development approach had to be broken down in the process. A new learning development approach, based on the reflective cycles of action research and aiming at promoting change and establishing a new awareness, was adopted.

8.3 The value and significance of the research

The major findings of the study relate to the questions and objectives posed at the beginning of the study. The research methodology, which is an extremely powerful instrument, was found suitable for institutional change.

Learners unanimously supported the online learning community as a very successful and preferred learning environment. This proved that a community learning environment can be established successfully with Internet communication technologies within the Unisa context and that it is viable as a second delivery mode. Current teaching practice may, however, be a comfort zone sustained by an industrialist learning production and delivery system. The research has proven that current teaching commitments are not sufficient for the online learning community. In addition, it has enabled constructive critique of print-based teaching and support. The team-based learning development
process adopted in 1994 did not lead to change in practice and systems as expected. A new development process was suggested.

### 8.3.1 Action research as a change methodology

The use of the action research methodology has provided the teaching and support staff involved with a collaborative research environment that empowered them to critically analyse their practice. Action plans were devised, implemented and subjected to criticism. In the process, empowerment to question discourse, practice and organisation, and emancipation from restrictive systems was developed. The research process inspired stakeholders to transform themselves within the Unisa environment and to promote change.

In this research a new learning development process was established based on the commitments of action research. In the process new relationships were formed between stakeholders involved in learning development and the process as a new form of work organisation developed. The components of this process forced the learning developer and other staff members to engage in activities that established a new learning development practice based on inclusivity and a commitment to change. The language used included terms such as trust, dissemination of information, collaboration, development, understanding, and engagement. These concepts established a learning development discourse that may inform the complete process at the institution in the long term.

Action research can therefore serve an extremely valuable purpose when change is to be established in educational organisations. In the case of Unisa the very efficient industrial print production system became a hurdle to overcome when innovation of learning philosophies was enabled through new educational technologies. Implementing technologies for learning can be implemented in a ‘tired and stale’ manner, without real change of the people in the organisation. Such an instrumental approach might also have produced
good results, but it would probably not have formed critical reflective actors who were responsible for questioning restrictive systems and related practice.

Institutions may not be aware of the fact that they are operating under a restrictive production and delivery culture and might therefore attempt innovation and change with limited success. The commitments enshrined in action research may enable a new understanding through critical reflection which establishes a new consciousness as a foundation for change.

8.3.2 A successful online learning community in the Unisa context

An economies-of-scale based production and delivery system, coping with a fast growing student population, has forced a reduction in communication, tuition and support in learning provision at Unisa. This reality has come to be accepted and the self-contained print package has gone almost unchallenged for a decade since the first need for improvement of the quality of delivery was expressed in the 1992-1993 period.

With the implementation of this sample course, it has been proven that a social constructivist learning experience can be created and sustained within the Unisa context. The learning experience has proved to be successful in terms of learner feedback and pass rates. The following outcomes were achieved:

- Social support;
- Learner empowerment;
- Transformative learning;
- Critical reflection and self-reflection;
- Engaged learning;
- A preferred learning environment;
- Self-imposed pressure and commitment;
- A communicative, collaborative and supportive environment;
• Independent research;
• Exercising academic writing.

In contrast to the positive feedback provided concerning the online course, learners were very critical about the quality of the print-based learning they had experienced in the past. The achievements of this research can serve as an opportunity to re-examine print-based production and delivery and to devise strategies and solutions to increase the quality significantly. However, this will however demand a change in the economies driving the institution and the teaching culture supported. Another implication of this research points toward the reason why institutions in general would employ new learning technologies. It would certainly be possible to implement them without seizing the opportunity to improve the quality of learning. The implementation of new learning technologies should be accompanied by a critical assessment of institutional practice and systems in order to affect positive change.

8.3.3 Coping with online teaching responsibilities

Currently the Unisa production and delivery system takes care of most of the support responsibilities in the form of self-contained learning packages. The teacher may find himself or herself ‘programmed’ by an industrial print-based environment. The new responsibilities demanded by the role of the online learning community facilitator are radically different in commitment and practice from the responsibilities of the print-based teacher. The print-based teacher may struggle to be successful in the online environment as he or she is challenged by intense engagement with learner activity.

Staff are continuously challenged by learner participation in the continuous construction of knowledge — they are exposed as ‘knowledge providers’ and as teachers. Should staff make themselves available to teach in this mode it would almost be as if they were ‘committing’ teaching in an environment where an industrial delivery system is continuously refined in order to ‘reduce
teaching’. Consequently, it would not necessarily be effective to rely on previous teaching experience in this new environment.

The implication of this struggle of Unisa teachers can be significant for staff of other institutions of higher learning too. It is possible that when online learning is adopted as another form of learning provision, the same teaching practice may be applied. This may make the learning experience appear not be producing the proper results, while it might be that the role of the teacher has not been properly assessed and developed for the particular form of online learning. If new technologies are adopted with sound pedagogical consideration, it is paramount to address the role of the teacher or facilitator towards establishing an appropriate teaching culture. To address this problem, and as a first step to take the action research commitment to continuous critical assessment of current practice further, the awareness course (another innovation attempt) was developed and successfully piloted to assist staff to make progress towards a shift in understanding.

### 8.3.4 A new learning development process

The learning development process predominantly employed at Unisa has assigned a lesser role to the instructional designer. With such a role he or she has had to follow print traditions when developing the learning experience. With the proper mandate the instructional designer has to be empowered to assist team members to become critical about their current roles and practice in order to effect change. Every learning development project can be regarded as an opportunity to change the delivery culture of the institution.

In this research project the learning developer came to see himself as a change agent (not a print systems agent). Changes in systems and practices were demanded by the process in order to make the learning experience successful. In this sense the learning developer became the hub of change for institutional systems and practices. This innovation role implied a struggle which was
overcome by persistence. But the learning development process as a whole had to be revisited. It had to be inclusive and it had to provide the opportunity to instill a new consciousness amongst those tasked with delivering the new learning experience. The four phased development process, based on reconnaissance, planning, development and implementation, and enrichment, provides the opportunity for stakeholders to critically assess practice and systems, to develop alternatives and to inform the institution.

This part of the research is significant for institutions worldwide that are in the ‘learning development and provision business’. With an inferior role being played by the learning developer (previously the instructional designer) the core business of institutions may be neglected in that it may stagnate into producing and delivering learning products that do not serve the needs of quality learning at a particular stage. Learning development processes may also be more aligned with the economies of the institution than with quality learning and teaching. Development teams should be able to serve innovation and change rather than enforcing ‘something that works’.

8.4 Recommendations for further study

This research has generated other questions that are beyond the scope of this study and which could form the basis for further study. Some of these questions and research opportunities are as follows:

- If the online learning community is accepted as a delivery mode, the long term effects on the practice and systems of Unisa could be investigated.
- The increase in teaching responsibilities and the accent on a different commitment may change the ‘academic landscape’ of the institution. Will it be in need of more teachers and fewer subject specialists? What will the balance require?
• Unisa is operating according to an economies-of-scale-based production and delivery system. The improvement of teaching and learner support may severely disturb the current economies. What could the new economic realities be for the institution? Is there a correlation between cheap education and distance delivery?

• With the world’s resources connected to one network, the Internet, what would be the future role of the library of the distance education institution? What is the role of teachers at universities as content providers? Is the university still the most important source of knowledge in society?

• How competent are learners coming from a social constructivist learning experience, such as the online learning community, as compared with their print-based peers who have studied in a print-based environment?

• What would be the effect on Unisa if the suggested learning development process were made compulsory? Will it be able to more effectively adapt and change its teaching and delivery culture which seems extremely strong at the moment?