Inaugural lecture to be held on 25 October 2016

Conversations with students: What is it they want us to hear?

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Introduction

The reason for choosing this topic for an inaugural lecture is that reflecting back on 25 years of lecturing at Unisa I am convinced that this is the most important aspect of my work as a lecturer and I felt it was important to share my experiences and insights in this regard as I had been conversing with around 180 000 students during these years. This year alone I am the lecturer for over 18 000 students in 6 different modules.

Interaction with students in Open Distance Learning (ODL) in Higher Education (HE) has been researched extensively as it is widely recognised as a crucial element of teaching and learning in such institutions. Unisa is no different in this regard and it also receives a lot of attention at this institution. Nonetheless ODL in HE institutions are often blamed for lack of and bad communication with students, be it true or not in practice.

What is usually understood as interaction with students is student-study materials, student-student and student-lecturer interactions. From reading the literature and through reflecting on own experiences it seems that student-lecturer interaction mostly focuses on lecturer initiated interactions such as announcements on the Learning Management System and a bit less on student initiated interactions.

As will be seen in the literature review this is also the case in the research dealing with this topic. Personal conversations initiated by students are seldom dealt with and very scant attention seems to be given to it by researchers. The research for this lecture was therefore specifically and exclusively focussed on personal conversations between students and lecturers that were initiated by students. These conversations included e-mails, letters, faxes, SMS's, Whatsapp messages, home phone and cellular calls, appointments, Skype conversations and conversations at workshops and school visits.

The objective of the research was to firstly find out what students were conversing about, how they were doing it and how it manifested in practice. Several patterns emerged from this that might have significance for universities. The research however also went beyond this thematic analysis and it went into the realm of interpretation of conversations to try and determine the underlying stimuli, reasons and motivations student had for initiating the conversations, because that would reflect their innate needs. Very thought-provoking results emerged from this and recommendations for practice could be based on these insights gained.

Literature review

The literature regarding communication between lecturers and students was reviewed using the following parameters:

•   Sources were limited to those referring directly to communication between lecturers and students (excluding tutors and university officials in administrative departments)

•   Sources are limited to one-on-one communication between lecturers and students (excluding mass e-mails, messages on the LMS, information in tutorial matter, mass messages on social media).

•   Sources were sought that illuminated theoretical frameworks related to the theme of the study.

To understand why communication between lecturers and students is important for students in ODL in HE one first need to understand how they experience learning at a distance. Researchers have found that students in ODL in HE perceive "distance" in different ways. Some are very conscious of the actual Geographical distance while others are more aware of distance in pedagogical terms (Moore 1980). Ross, Gallagher & Macleod on their part refer to distance in a relational sense. Probably researchers will find more perspectives like these but whatever they are or may be they are most evident in ODL. Chawinga & Zozie (2016) express student's experience of distance as a feeling of isolation and neglect and found a direct alignment between lecturer immediacy and student involvement and contentment.

Researchers have also attempted to find out how the issue of distance can be addressed. According to Martindale (2002) there are three ways to curtail the sense of being "distanced" namely how courses are structured, how students can be supported to become self-directed and most importantly for this discussion, how effective the communication is between lecturers and students. Martindale (2002) furthermore found that it is not so much distance that determines the effect of teaching and learning but rather the quality of communication between lecturers and students. His contention is that the personalities of lecturers (among other factors) actually determine the effectiveness of such communications and that that has a direct influence on learning experiences in ODL. This is an important finding in terms of this discussion as it has a direct bearing on an aspect of communication not found in any other research.

The importance of personal communication between lecturers and students was also researched by Croxton (2014) who found that a lack of instructor presence is a significant factor in decisions by students to continue or abandon their studies in ODL in HE. In terms of throughput and retention effective communication is therefore crucial in this setting.

Walkem (2014) indicates that personal communication between lecturers and students in ODL in HE (especially in the form of e-learning) is hampered by its very nature – that of being decentralized and asynchronous. Ross, Gallagher & Macleod (2013) consider it all the more reason why it is the responsibility of lecturers to create "openings" and/or opportunities for students to enable them to communicate with their lecturers, saying that these could be very personal and individual in nature (such as a private friendly e-mail). Walkem (2014) considers effective personal communication between lecturers and students so important that she considers it a quality criterion for effective learning in ODL in HE.

In more general terms researchers have found that learners benefit from increased interaction (which includes personal communication between lecturers and students) in ODL in HE (Dzakiria, 2008, Dzakiria, Azilah, Abdul & Christopher, 2013, Vimala, 2014).

The research consulted is therefore supportive of the importance of effective personal communication in distance learning. The gap in research identified is how this personal communication between lecturers and students (or more accurately put the communication of students with lecturers) manifests itself in practice and what students want to say to us through their communication. The focus of the research was student initiated conversations with lecturers and the intention was to go beyond the actual words being communicated to rather try and read between the lines so that we as lecturers can attempt to understand the needs, the emotions and the motivations underlying these communications. The research question therefore is: What is it that students want lecturers to hear in their personal conversations with them?

Theoretical frameworks relevant to communication or interaction between lecturers and the students in ODL in HE that presented themselves in the research literature were the Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) postulated by Moore (1997) and the idea of immediacy in communication between lecturers and the students in ODL.

Moore (1997) postulated that there is a cognitive space in any teaching and learning situation in which dialogue takes place. This is also relevant in ODL in HE where interactions (including personal communications) takes place between lecturers and students. It is relevant to this research in that inefficiency of communication may negatively influence learning experiences of students.

The idea of immediacy in communication between lecturers and students in ODL is based on the creation of a perception of closeness through verbal or non-verbal communication and is "aimed at increasing closeness, encouraging communication, facilitating student input and self-disclosure, creating a sense of belonging, and establishing cognitive presence (Ghamdi 2017:36).

It is the opinion of the researcher that Vygotsky's theory on the zone of proximal development also has some bearing on the subject but as a virtual rather than an actual zone of proximal development in the case of ODL in HE. Whereas Vygotsky argued that the teacher should gradually decrease the support of the teacher it will be argued that students seem to acutely experience that there is too little support by lecturers and that they have a need for more scaffolding in the zone of proximal development and will also where possible take the initiative in trying to bring this about.

Regarding student–lecturer communication/interaction Anderson's (2003a and b) Interaction Equivalency Theorem has direct relevance for this study in that Anderson posited that there are three types of interaction in HE namely interaction between student and study materials, interaction a between student and other students and most relevant here, the interaction between student and lecturer.

It is Anderson's theory that if one of the three types of interaction is of a very high quality the other two types can be reduced or even done away with without prejudicing the learning experience for students. In this research it will be argued that by ensuring very effective communication between students and the lecturer issues associated with peer interaction and student-content interaction can be overcome without compromising the learning experience. Consequent research (Rhode, 2008 and 2009, Miyazoe, 2009, Miyazoe & Anderson 2010) supports the theory and a particularly meaningful finding by Miyazoe (2009) was that students value student-lecturer interaction more than the other two types of interaction in skill-based courses. This is of particular interest to the researcher as the communications that were included in the research were all from students in skills-based courses.

Methodology

Research was done from an initial Constructivist paradigm, but part of it was done from an Interprevist paradigm while it is anticipated that the result might be Transformative in nature. The research was undertaken as a case study (one university) and was qualitative in nature as the data was gathered from documentation (document research) in the form of e-mails, letters, faxes, SMS's, Whatsapp's and transcriptions of phone calls.

Data was analysed using qualitative data processing protocols. It started off by identifying meaning units of data and coding them. These were then assigned to broad domains before being sorted into categories that contained data that had similarities and connections to one another. The categories were scrutinised for significations (that is what the meaning and implications were of what the students were conveying when writing or saying what they did). From the categories a number of themes emerged which created a taxonomy to display the essence of the phenomena as it emerged from the findings.

The case study

The research was undertaken among the following groups of initial teacher education students at an ODL in HE institution (the University of South Africa [Unisa]) which are being lectured solely by the author and who all have the direct contact details of the lecturer – in other words students who are in a position to contact the lecturer in a variety of ways:

- 12 000 students doing practical teaching (BEd and PGCE senior phase and FET) – four modules

- 6 000 students who are doing an assessment course (BEd and PGCE intermediate and senior phase and FET) – one module

- 400 students doing a methodology of Geography teaching course (BEd and PGCE senior phase and FET) – one module

- 8 masters and doctorate students

- 50 Geography matric teachers involved in workshops held as part of a community engagement project

Unisa is an Open Distance Learning Institution offering qualifications in Higher Education. The qualifications relevant to this research are initial teacher education qualifications namely the BEd senior Phase and FET and the PGCE senior phase and FET.

A blended learning approach is used at Unisa in that some students make use of hard copy study material and submit assignments by post. Others use online study materials and submit assignments online while some use a combination of the aforementioned. There is also a range of students from those writing venue-based exams to those submitting portfolios or e-portfolios as examination equivalents for their summative assessments.

Students in the four practical teaching modules each has to complete 25 school days of practical teaching at a functional school during which they are assessed at school by mentor teachers and Unisa supervisors while they also submit assignments and a portfolio of evidence.

The means of personal communication with the lecturer that are available to students are e-mails, letters, faxes, SMS's, Whatsapp messages and home phone and cellular calls. Students may also make appointments to meet the lecturer personally, make use of Skype and can converse with him at workshops or during school visits.

No restrictions are placed on students regarding the times of day or night or days of the week that they may contact the lecturer.

Data gathering

No accurate count of student initiated communications was made for the whole of 2016 but ten randomly chosen days were selected (one for each month) to count conversations and three randomly chosen weeks were chosen to count conversations to try and determine how many communications are received on average per day and per week.

Findings

On average the researcher receives the following number of **student initiated conversations** per day and per week:

	Per day	Per week (7 days)
e-mails,	21	135
Letters and faxes	0	0,3
SMS's,	12	65
Whatsapp messages	5	13
home phone	7	41
cellular calls.	27	167
Appointments, Skype, workshops, school visits	0,1	0,2
TOTAL	72,1	321,5

At very busy times (such as shortly before a submission date) the following exceptionally high numbers of student initiated conversations are attained:

- Fifty-nine missed calls received during a two hour meeting

- Two-hundred and eighty-eight e-mails on a submission day

One would expect large numbers of conversations to be initiated from large numbers of students but the fact that four of the modules deal with teaching practice (which is a very complicated and complex endeavour) exacerbates the situation and probably trebles the numbers of conversations one would ordinarily expect from students in other modules.

From the data two themes emerged. The first theme dealt with conversations that indicate what students are talking about when they contact the lecturer and is named "Some students will …". Nine categories were included under this theme. They are:

Category 1: Some students will not or cannot work diligently

Category 2: Some students will exploit the lecturers' easy availability

Category 3: Some students will expect to be spoon fed

Category 4: Some students will complain about everything

Category 5: Some students will exploit the university system

Category 6: Some students will get sick

Category 7: Some students will not necessarily be totally honest

Category 8: Some students will place moral pressure on the lecturer

Category 9: Some students will resorting to making threats

Theme two is named "Students want …" as categories dealing with perceived student needs are included under it. The categories are:

Category 1: Students have a basic need to be recognised/accepted/acknowledged

Category 2: Students have a natural need for affirmation

Category 3: Students seem to have an inborn need to converse with a human being

Category 4: Students often have an urgent need to state an issue or solve a problem that cannot wait

Category 5: Students sometime need external motivation to proceed, to stay active or to "drop in" (stay enrolled) rather than drop out

Category 6: Students sometimes feel isolated, alone and just need to share their feelings with someone

Category 7: Students feel desperate and helpless and need someone to take their plight to heart

Discussion of the themes and categories

Theme 1 "Some students will …"

This theme deals with the conversational behaviour of students: what they are talking about, how they go about it, and how it manifests in practice. From the student initiated conversations the following could be deduced:

Category 1: Some students will not or cannot work diligently

It happens quite often that students contact the lecturer because they have busy lives or do not prioritise their studies and do not read the tutorial matter. Examples of conversations regarding information already available in tutorial matter are:

> *Do I do two practicals or only one?*

> *Where do I get a school to do IT practical?*

Such students utilise the lecturer as an easy information supplier.

Category 2: Some students will exploit the lecturers' easy availability

In most cases conversations initiated by students has no bearing on academic matters, such as in the following examples where he was phoned on his cellular phone:

> *I lost the number for Assignments that you gave me, can you give it to me again?*

> *Until today I did not receive my study letters.*

Many students will therefore ignore the guidelines stating that the lecturer should not be contacted for administrative matters. It is an easy shortcut for them to rather contact the lecturer because they know their query will be forwarded to the correct department. I might also be that they experience difficulty in contacting such departments as they do not have cellular phone numbers for such departments. The following is an example:

> *First of all my most sincere apologies for contacting you with this matter. I have been trying my best to communicate with the person who is supposed to be handling this matter, but there has been no response after several attempts. I was hoping they would perhaps respond more promptly or at all if a Professor addresses them.*

In such cases the lecturer becomes a conduit to get in contact with other persons or entities that are more difficult to reach.

Category 3: Some students will expect to be spoon fed

Although aspects of practical teaching are spelled out in great detail in the portfolio students will still request more which they as adult learners should be able to manage themselves. They are for instance given the website of the Department of

Basic Education to access the curriculum documents for their subject but will not be satisfied with that. Examples are:

> *When I go to the website I cannot get the right place for the isiXhosa CAPS.*

> *Can you tell me where I have to click to get to the CAPS for Physical Science?*

In such cases students are over dependant on the lecturer and do not develop the skills they should have as adult learners.

Category 4: Some students will complain about everything

There are students who immediately will escalate a matter if they feel that they are not satisfied with a response as they consider it their right. Examples are:

> *I sent an e-mail yesterday and I had no response so I am now sending it to the Dean …*

> *You cannot tell me I should reregister for something I have done. You will hear from this again when I contact the authorities.*

In many of these cases it is students who experience difficulties because they did not meet their own responsibilities but then take out their annoyance on the lecturer. The lecturer therefore becomes the focus of student dissatisfaction.

Category 5: Some students will exploit the university system

Some students contact the lecturer to query something that happened a long time ago and omit to say that it has already been indicated at the time that nothing can be done, hoping I would have forgotten and would think Unisa is to blame and that I will sort it out for them such as in the following case:

> *My name is …, the husband to one of your student(s) who registered for the post graduate diploma in Education in 2015. She submitted all her assignments for the course and completed the compulsory 5weeks practical training … when results were released, her results were missing. Hence, I am left with no choice than to lay a formal complaint about this maltreatment meted out on my family.*

The real situation was that the student herself contacted the lecturer about a year ago and was told that she did not have examination admission. This fact was not mentioned by her husband in his e-mail perhaps hoping that the lecturer will not notice or remember.

It also happens that students who are not satisfied with the response from the lecturer contact someone else to see if they cannot get a different answer/result to their query. The lecturer gets to know about this when the query is then forwarded to

him by the other person that was contacted. Sometimes students will even contact the COD/Dean/Vice Principal/Principal to see if the lecturer will not be instructed to do something even if he already indicated that nothing can be done. The following is an example:

> *Dear student. I have responded to your e-mails on three occasions. In my last e-mail to you on 22 August I asked you to submit your proof of submission to Assignments. For some reason you decided not to do it and to rather send a complaint to my manager stating that I refuse to assist you ...*

In such cases lecturers are utilised to try and manipulate the university system

Category 6: Some students will get sick

> *I am in a bit of a situation and I was hoping you could help. I was meant to submit my PTEAC1X and PTEAC2Y assignment 50 portfolios on the 30th of September. I was so stressed about getting it all together in time that I was sick for most of September (while still teaching full time every day) and I got really sick from the 25th of September. I really tried to get it done in time (I slept about 2 hours every night for a week before the deadline) but between all my teaching obligations and being exhausted, sick and overly stressed I just couldn't complete it all and have it scanned in time. I eventually collapsed and was taken to the doctor and was booked off … (please see sick note attached).*

In such cases lecturers are used as interventionists that will be required to assist students when they are vulnerable through no fault of their own.

Category 7: Some students will not necessarily be totally honest

Students will resort to making false claims to exonerate themselves from blame and will send an e-mail like the following:

> *But I did submit that assignment and I received confirmation by SMS.*

> When asked for the evidence they amongst others respond with:

> *I have changed phones and no longer have it.*

One reported the following:

> *They broke into my car and stole my laptop/ assignment.*

> When asked for evidence he responded with:

> *I did not report the theft.*

In such cases students consider lecturers as pushovers to be manipulated through the use of falsehoods (almost like telling the teacher the dog ate your homework).

Category 8: Some students will place moral pressure on the lecturer

Students try and put moral pressure on the lecturer to make special concessions for them such as in the following instances:

> I am extremely busy with the school, my family and so on, I have matrics and they must get priority so I need an extension …

> I am supposed to work my bursary back from next year (they funded my undergrad …) and if I fail this year I may be requested to immediately refund the whole bursary amount plus interest. Failing PTEAC1X and PTEAC2Y will prevent me from being employed and paid as a fully qualified teacher next year and will thus set me back very severely in my personal and professional development.

> I am over 50 and …, I have to complete this qualification and I will lose my job if I do not pass this module.

> I got very high marks for all my other modules so it is not possible that I failed yours. I am a single mother and if I can pass this module I can get a higher salary. I have been enrolled for … years and only need this module.

Where possible one can try and assist because these are legitimate anxieties of students but there is a limit to what can be done within the system.

Lecturers are therefore utilised by these students as empathisers or "care-givers" that will feel sorry for the plight of their students and hopefully will go to great lengths to assist them because of their "special" circumstances.

Category 9: Some students will resort to making threats

Some students think they can scare the lecturer into doing the things they want such as in the following cases:

> *I will take this matter to the Minister of Higher Education and Training (At least once a query did come from the minister but it was a non-academic matter)*

> *My uncle is the minister of education in … province and he will …*

> *I will report you to the SRC and they will force you …*

> *I will use these e-mails as evidence of how you do not want to help me and will send them to Blade Nzimande to see what he thinks of this.*

One student even had to be reported to legal services for threatening to harm the lecturer:

> *You do not know who you are dealing with and it will go badly for you if you do not …*

In such cases the lecturer is seen by students as someone to be exploited to get their way.

The question that needs to be answered is why are students doing the above. There must be reasons for not contacting the correct departments, making threats and trying to put moral pressure on the lecturer or just to contact the lecturer for something insignificant.

It must be remembered that the teaching practice modules are extremely high-stakes examinations and failing them has grave consequences as students may lose their teaching jobs if they do not complete the qualifications within a certain timeframe. For someone not completing in a particular year it can mean that they will have to wait another year to be able to apply for a teaching job or if they are already teaching, they will have to do so for another year at a reduced salary. These are powerful drivers at the core of student initiated conversations and are emotive in nature.

The next theme emerging from the data will perhaps give more clarity on why and how students initiate conversations with lecturer as it deals with the perceived needs of students.

Theme 2: Students want …

Reading between the lines to find hidden meanings of conversations goes beyond the words contained in the conversations and means that the researcher must interpret the message and thereby give a researcher/ lecturer voice to the data. Some clues to the meaning of the conversations could be found in follow-up conversations and/or in the contexts of the conversations. The researchers' own experience of working in ODL in HE for 25 years and having conversations with approximately 180 000 students in that time contributed to the interpretation of meanings and colleagues with similar experiences of similar conversations were also consulted for their interpretations. Peers were furthermore asked to give input on interpretations of the researcher. The hidden meaning of conversations that could be derived in this manner are discussed next.

Category 1: Students have a basic need to be recognised/accepted/acknowledged

Many students send an e-mail to just say here I am, I am enrolled in your course, I just want to introduce myself.

> *Dear prof Dreyer I just received my study material for your assessment course and I also bought your excellent book on assessment. I want to introduce myself if that is alright with you. My name is … and I worked as an Accountant for several years before I got involved in the coaching of rugby at the local primary school. I soon realised that I would rather work with children than with figures and enrolled for the PGCE last year. I now am enrolled for three of*

> *your modules and an really looking forward to the assessment course and the practical teaching.*

In such cases one should not squander the opportunity to engage with such positive students but should thank them for their interest and should positively reinforce their enthusiasm.

Category 2: Students have a natural need for affirmation

This aspect is the related to the previous one as students need someone to tell them they are all-right, they are progressing well, they are on the right track and they are interpreting the work correctly. The many conversations starting with:

> *I just want to make sure …*

attest to this. This is not an answer they can get from tutorial matter and often the only person that can assist with this is the lecturer.

Category 3: Students seem to have an inborn need to converse with a human being at the university

The practice of the university to require students to send an sms or an e-mail and to then get a response by SMS or e-mail is dehumanising the institution and is increasing the relational distance between students and university staff members. The following is an example:

> *I have sent three SMS's to … over the last week and there is no response from them. What must I do now. I cannot phone, I cannot find them. Please help.*

One should rethink a system that evoke feelings of alienation and dehumanisation, as it has a negative influence on student satisfaction and retention.

Category 4: Students often have an urgent need to state an issue or solve a problem that cannot wait

In one of the pertinent cases a student struggled for hours to submit an assignment online after work hours. She phoned the researcher at 11:55 pm to try and get a solution as the chance for submission lapsed at midnight. In another case a student arrived at a school to do her teaching practice and they told her it is not possible for her to do it there anymore. She could not wait to hear back from an e-mail several days later as she took special leave from her work to do the practical teaching and could not afford to lose a day. The following is an example:

> *Very sorry for bothering you with this mail, it is only because I am desperate.*

Delayed reaction from the university is of no help to students in crisis situations and these occur often when university systems fail students. One should probably

consider ways of meeting this need of students even if it is just at certain high risk periods such as submission deadlines for portfolios.

Category 5: Students sometime need external motivation to proceed, to stay active or to "drop in" (stay enrolled) rather than drop out

An example is a mature student that was making a career change to teaching and had difficulties at a school during her practical teaching period. She phoned the researcher and was at the point of dropping out (although this was one of only two modules she needed to complete her qualification). A different school could be found for her immediately and she could complete her practical teaching. If there was no one she could talk to she might have dropped out as indicated in her thank you note:

> *When I phoned you I was desperate. I am already 48 years old and was living with my parents as I had to quit my job to complete the teaching practice. The mentor gave me a hard time as the learners told her that they preferred it when I taught them and not her. It was impossible to continue there and I thought my dream of becoming a teacher was becoming a nightmare. Your intervention literally saved my future and my career. The school you sent me to instead in the end offered me a teaching post for next year. I cannot ever express my gratitude to you. You are a true mentor and I will model my attitude to learners on your example. Thank you so much you changed my life.*

If one can make such a difference in a student's life, it is certainly not too much to ask to dedicate some time to accomplish that.

Category 6: Students sometimes feel isolated, alone and just need to share their feelings with someone

In one case a student told the researcher early in the year that she fell pregnant and that she would have difficulty in completing her practical teaching before the closing date. A new submission date was agreed and the researcher thought that the matter was resolved but regular as clockwork a message from her was received keeping the researcher informed about her pregnancy, the birth, the size (52cm) and weight of the baby (3,6kg), the breastfeeding (considered to be the best option) and the state of health of mother and baby(both in perfect health). The pregnancy was brought into every conversation and amongst others she said:

> *I trust that the pregnancy brain hasn't allowed me to make too many mistakes ...*

Although there are boundaries regarding involvement in personal matters the student in this conversation became much more human to me. And she in her turn felt she communicated with an interested (and hopefully caring) person (and by association university).

Category 7: Students feel desperate and helpless and need someone to take their plight to heart

Students are sometimes quite desperate to get their problems solved as they do not understand how the Unisa systems function and that at such a big institution departments function independently with strictly delineated responsibilities. The following is an example:

> *I was set from pillar to post and I humbly request you to please send my query to the correct person as everyone says it is another person that works with it. You helped me with another issue last year and I have no-one else I can turn to.*

An extreme example is a student who sent over a thousand e-mails with the same message to me. Every few seconds for a number of hours during the night he resent it out of frustration and anger. Unfortunately it was about something that everyone else had already told him could not be resolved and he would just not accept it.

University staff members are limited to what they can do to assist students but often when students approach the lecturer they indicate that this or that department SAID they must contact the lecturer. Many times the query deals purely with an administrative matter that cannot be solved by a lecturer. Perhaps one should invest time in creating a caring attitude when conversing with students.

Recommendations

From what students are conversing about and from the perceived needs they have in ODL in HE it is possible to make some practical recommendations.

One could try and prepare student friendly ,less formal information and less template -based tutorial letters (for instance no "U" in Afrikaans versions, some humour, some humanness, some pictures). To humanise the lecturer by including some personal information and a photo could make a difference to how students perceive them. By telling them that you were also a teacher with a large workload while studying and that you are aware of their contexts can help assure students that you understand their concerns and challenges and am attuned to their circumstances.

To limit simple information queries lecturers could introduce more frequently asked questions. From this research it is however clear that many students ignore FAQ's and find it easier to just contact the lecturer for an answer probably because they have such busy lives. It is recommended in such cases that students should be educated when doing that by simply referring them back to their study material. Otherwise they will keep on contacting lecturers unnecessarily and keep being dependant on them for things they themselves should be able to know and do. This is aligned with the Vygotskyan principal of steadily increasing more independent

learning. FAQ's can perhaps be fore fronted more conspicuously in tutorial matter (not at the end of thirty pages).

More regular announcements before submission dates repeating pertinent information regarding format, dates and procedures can also assist in limiting purely information-based conversations.

By providing more contact details from more staff members in administrative departments lecturers can limit such conversions. A lot of time can be saved if one does not have to forward seven out of every ten conversations to the correct recipients. The present system of sending an SMS or e-mail query is detested by students and an alternative should be considered where they can talk to an informed human being in each department.

To assist students with emergency situations the university should consider instituting a 24/7 helpline even if is just for high risk periods. This will also limit conversations with lecturers because staff members in administrative departments are only available during office hours and students resort to contacting the lecturer even if they know they should not, because the do not have an alternative.

The introduction of an cell-phone app that provides information on portfolios can drastically cut the number of conversations experienced in this regard. Students do not always have their study material with them but they always have their cell-phones with them and can easily access the information they need instead of contacting the lecturer.

If Unisa takes research on personal communications with students in ODL in HE and this research to heart, the institution should be striving to create as many opportunities for such conversations as possible and should be striving to improve the quality of such conversations by improving the availability of lecturers. This is only possible by appointing more lecturers as the present lecturer- student ratio is out of all proportion and makes it impossible to genuinely value student conversations and to give the necessary time and care in communicating with them.

From own experience there is also the impression that universities value tuition (in which communication with students are critical) less than more visible outputs like research. Unisa could perhaps seriously consider instituting tuition focussed career paths for lecturers where those that are expert lecturers have the same promotion opportunities than those that are more research focussed.

Conclusion

The research finding discussed above fully aligns with and contributes to existing literature where researchers are fully agreed that effective personal communication in distance learning is of prime importance and is in fact one of the pillars of efficient student interaction which ODL institutions in HE strive for. There is furthermore general agreement that learners benefit from increased interaction (which includes

personal communication between lecturers and students) in ODL in HE. It would therefore be imprudent not to seek every possible opportunity to create avenues, means and the necessary time for lecturers to engage in such conversations with students, thereby ensuring higher student satisfaction and resultant drop in rather than drop out.

The respected theories related to student-lecturer interaction that were employed in the research give further credence to the value and worth of student-lecturer interaction. The Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) postulated by Moore (1997) regarding cognitive spaces in teaching and learning situation where dialogue takes place was found to be relevant to this research in that inefficiency of communication may negatively influence learning experiences of students. Similarly it was found that students value immediacy of lecturers in that it provides a cognitive presence and a

One research finding indicated that students demonstrate lecturer dependence one would not expect at this level of study and that lecturers must take measure to ensure more independent learning as per Vygotsky's theory on the zone of proximal development (a zone which is virtual in distance learning). The findings also supported Anderson's (2003a and b) Interaction Equivalency Theorem regarding the importance of the interaction between student and lecturer, even more so in skills-based courses as also found in the research of Miyazoe (2009).

The research resulted in some new insights regarding student initiated conversations with lecturers and highlighted this as a crucial matter that ODL institutions in HE should prioritise to improve student satisfaction and limit dropout.

The researcher is the first to acknowledge that all student queries are not always answered or answered courteously or dealt with, with the care they deserve. Some fall through the cracks, some take time to attend to and are forgotten and some are dealt with hastily. It can however also be stated that a very large percentage is attended to timeously, courteously and caringly. It is in that, that an enormous amount of pleasure and pride can be experienced and it is in that which probably lies the most important function of lecturers. Lecturers in ODL in HE do not meet their students in class and the conversations they have with them on the available contact media is the only opportunity to have personal contact with them. One should optimise and make the most of these opportunities. The lecturers will benefit from this, the students will benefit from this and the university will benefit from this greatly.

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