ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 23, 21 JULY 2010

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## 1   OBLIQUITY – WHY OUR GOALS ARE BEST ACHIEVED INDIRECTLY
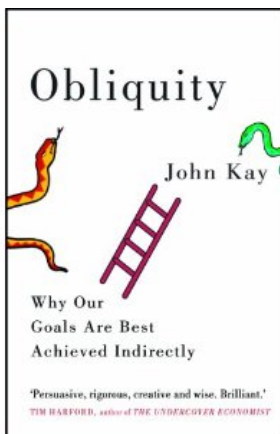
John Kay (2010) authored "Obliquity – why our goals are best achieved indirectly" and the book provided (and still provides) me with food for thought regarding our belief that *exact* planning into the smallest details will help us to deliver on our objectives. For example, Unisa's performance management systems require that we must all be very clear regarding how our personal daily tasks relate to our departmental objectives, what weight they carry, what activities we plan to execute, what will be the measures of performance, and lo and behold, what are the targets and standards. In our study guides we plan up to the finest details the outcomes for each study unit in words such as "After this study unit you should (sic) be able to …" We have strategic plans, operational plans and then, alas, functional plans – and all of the plans have their targets, their alignments, their criteria and performance measures. All the above examples are based on the assumption that the more direct we are in our plans for achieving our outcomes, the greater the chances that we will. Kay (2010) seems to propose that *indirect* approaches actually achieve more…

Kay (2010:3-4) describes 'obliquity' as follows: "Obliquity describes the process of achieving complex objectives *indirectly*. In general, oblique approaches recognise that complex objectives tend to be imprecisely defined and contain many elements that are not necessarily or obviously compatible with each other, and that we learn about the nature of the objectives and the means of achieving them during a process of experiment and discovery" (emphasis added). Kay (2010) illustrates the point by reflecting on the impact of an overreliance on rational decision making on a specific period on architectural design (eg Le Corbusier and others) where the details of buildings where pre-planned up to the smallest details, including even to the furnishings.

Kay (2010:5) writes: "The modernists knew less that they thought. A house is not simply a machine for living in. There is a difference between a house and a home. The functions of a home are complex: the utility of a building depends not only on its design but on the reactions of those who live in it".

These comments from Kay (2010) have interesting parallels in the work of Zygmunt Bauman in his work *"Globalisation. The Human Consequences"* *(*1998:43-44). Bauman quotes Corbusier, in the latter's work *La ville radieuse (*1933), where Corbusier suggested that cities should be highly structured, "cleansed of all disturbances caused by aimless strollers, idlers, loiterers or just accidental passers-by" (Bauman 1998:43). Corbusier referred to this dream as "le Plan". Bauman writes (1998:43):"The authority of the Plan, derived from and grounded in the objective truths of logic and aesthetics, bears no dissent or controversy; it accepts no arguments that refer to, or seek support in, anything other than logical or aesthetical rigours". Bauman continues to relate how one architect namely Oscar Niemeyer took Corbusier seriously and designed *Brasilia* (the new capital of Brazil) on a previously uninhabited plateau of central Brazil. Instead of a dream, the city ended as a "nightmare" and resulted in symptoms of *brasilitis* "by common consent, were the absence of crowds and crowdiness, empty street corners, the anonymity of places and the facelessness of human figures, and a numbing monotony of an environment devoid of anything to puzzle, perplex or excite" (Bauman 1998:44).
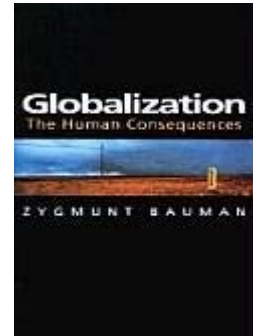
Kay (2010) contrasts the above approaches, to an oblique approach "recognises that what we want from a home, or a community, has many elements. We will never succeed in specifying fully what they are, and to the extent that we do, we discover that they are often incompatible and inconsistent. The interactions between a home and its occupants, or between the people who make up a community, are complex and uncertain". Kay (2010:7) therefore comments on "re-engineering" that it is a "substitution for adaptation and discovery – preferring the direct to the oblique".

Kay (2010) therefore proposes that the most direct way in achieving outcomes is *often* in indirect or oblique ways. Which makes me think of a number of aspects at Unisa… We want to have productive, competent and effective employees – and the most direct route is extensive and very detailed "performance management agreements". If Kay (2010) has a point, then most probably extensive performance agreements and management systems will not (necessarily) result in productive, competent and effective employees… ***If we take what Kay (2010) suggests seriously, what will be more indirect (and effective) ways to increase the quality of teaching and learning at Unisa?*** I just wonder.

2   CELEBRATING INTER-RELATIONSHIPS IN ODL
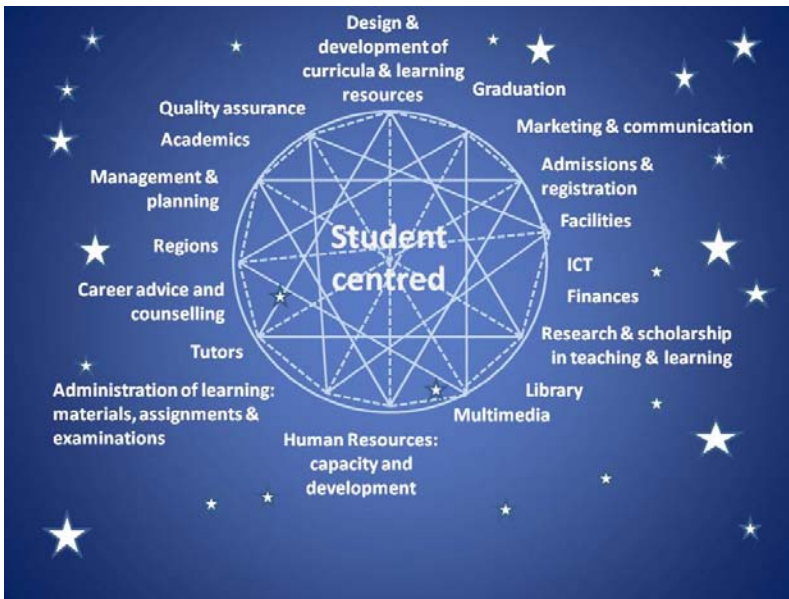
On Monday 19 there was an exhibition in Exam Hall 2 where all new employees at Unisa was welcomed and introduced to some key departments at Unisa. On Tuesday 20 July the exhibition was open to all Unisa employees. At the exhibition the ODL project also had a stall. The central image of the stall celebrated the relationships between different stakeholders in realising ODL.

Since Unisa started the journey to becoming a world-class fully-fledged ODL institution in 2007, we have come a long way. This exhibition celebrated *all* those who championed ODL since 2007. Without their leadership, daring and creativity, Unisa would not have come to realise the complexities, paradoxes, challenges and opportunities involved in being an ODL institution. Not only have we grown in our understanding of what it means to be an ODL institution, we have also come to understand how difficult it is to "make ODL work" without all the different stakeholders in Unisa contributing and being allowed to contribute their specific expertises. We have come to realise that ODL is not the responsibility of *only* one specific individual or department. ODL necessitates that we *all* have a critical understanding of where we fit in and how our assumptions, beliefs and efficiency impact on other stakeholders in realising ODL.

There is a lot written about ODL. There are a number of great ODL institutions in the world from which we can learn a lot. But at the end it will be left to each one of us to realise ODL – to make it happen in our specific context. This exhibition celebrated the contributions, expertise of and inter-relationships between each one of the different stakeholders at Unisa as we grow "Towards *the* African university in the service of humanity".

I would like to thank the following Unisa staff for making this stall a reality: Ms Feroza Patel (HR), Ms Marius Bosch (Marketing), Dr Leonie Steyn (DCLD), Ms Alice Goodwin-Davey (DCLD) and Ms Laura Schultz (Sound & Video), and Ms Tshoanelo Mokoena (Project Administrator, ODL).

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3   RETHINKING TUTORING AT UNISA

On Tuesday 20 July representatives from ODL Task Team 4 (Student Support) and ODL Task team 6 (Student retention and success) met to start the conversation on rethinking tutoring at Unisa. This was the first conversation in a series of conversations in which different stakeholders will be involved in rethinking tutoring at Unisa. It is crucial to include students, HR, Finances, ICT, DCCAD, TSDL, academics as well as the regions in this process. Based on the suggestions of Kay (2010) this is NOT about re-engineering student support at Unisa. We are re-thinking, re-imagining and re-envisioning tutoring at Unisa.

At present there is a very draft proposal on the table which proposes that though there may be aspects of the current tutoring system at Unisa which can be fine-tuned, that we urgently n3eed to look at increasing the scope and reach of academic *and* non-academic support at Unisa using a range of technologies more appropriately and effectively.

I will keep the Unisa community updated regarding the consultative process and the progress we make.

4   TO ADMIT OR NOT TO ADMIT…

To admit or not to admit… that is **NOT** the question. The question to ask seem to be: How do we admit students and for what purposes?

Since the start of deliberations regarding the possibility of raising the minimum admission requirements, the tension had always been between Unisa's social mandate of being the only dedicated comprehensive distance education higher education institution in South Africa; and our responsibility to take the under-preparedness of many of our students more seriously. An expanded ODL Task team 1 met on Thursday 15 July to reopen the discussions on raising the minimum admission requirements. The emphasis is now falling on how admission requirements relate to alternative pathways and the possibility of offering a range of higher certificates. Two things (among many others…) are becoming increasingly clearer. The first of these is that we cannot ignore evidence that there is a very strong correlation between proficiency in the language of tuition and student success. There are numerous international and national studies which provide ample evidence of the direct correlation between proficiency in the language of tuition and student success. The second thing that is becoming clearer is that the issue is NOT excluding students, but to provide appropriate pathways in into Unisa, whether these will be higher certificates, or extended curricula.

Prof Havenga, Dr Zawada ad Dr Linington were tasked to reformulate a proposal taking cognisance of the above. The expanded task team will reconvene on 11 August from 11:30-13:00 in TVW10-24 (Kopanong) to discuss the redrafted proposal. We wish them all of the best!

5   STUDENT TRACKING SYSTEM ON TRACK

DISA will hold its third Strategic Discussion Forum for 2010 on 28 July. At this forum, Unisa's emerging *Student Tracking/Intelligence System* will be demonstrated.

Enhancing student success and retention remains a top priority at Unisa. It has long been recognised that a key tool in pursuing this goal is the development of an appropriate Student Tracking System. In 2009, DISA adopted this project and developed a pilot system which contained cohort-based reports on students' academic progress at the qualification level. Following two open workshops and the work of the various ODL Task Teams, it was agreed to develop a comprehensive tracking/intelligence system as part of Unisa's emerging integrated student success and support frameworks. As a first step, it was agreed to enhance the pilot system by including course-level information by mid-2010.

This uniquely comprehensive system will draw from relevant quantitative and qualitative information about students (e.g. past and current socio-economic circumstances, activities, preferences & attitudes) and institutional processes (e.g. study material delivery, assessment & support services). It will provide early warning risk alerts, dashboards, scorecards and detailed information and reports directly to role players (academic and non-academic managers, lecturers, tutors, counselors, mentors and peer-helpers) via the web-based portal. On the basis of this, proactive and responsive support initiatives will be undertaken and Unisa's academic and non-academic services and practice will be continuously improved and, over time, evaluated.
The capabilities of the current system will be demonstrated and a preview of the functionality of the planned full system will be shown. Specifically, the identification of at-risk modules and students through the early warning alerts will be demonstrated. We are very fortunate to have Dr Roger Mills, an international expert in the field, as respondent. All interested staff are warmly invited to see what the tracking-intelligence system can do to enhance student success.

Presenters: Professor George Subotzky and Mr Glen Barnes, DISA
Respondent: Dr Roger Mills, Visiting Fellow, Centre for Distance Education, University of London and Research Associate Von Hugel Institute St Edmund's College.

Date: Wednesday 28 July 2010
Time: 14:00-16:00
Venue: Dr Miriam Makeba Concert Hall
RSVP: Pam Pistorius (tel: 012 429 2528; e-mail: pistopf@unisa.ac.za)

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6   SOCIAL SOFTWARE, SOCIAL NETWORKS, AND ONLINE DISTANCE LEARNING

The Institute for Open and Distance Learning (IODL) will host its fourth lecture in their occasional lecture series on 29th of July in the Senate Hall. The lecture will be presented by Prof Panda. **On the last page of this communiqué is more information on this event.**

7   ODL REPOSITORY AND BLOG

All the ODL task team reports, the overview of the recommendations of the STLSC and other ODL documents are available on the Unisa Library's Institutional Repository at http://uir.unisa.ac.za/dspace/handle/10500/3072 (accessed 12 July 2010). The repository is updated on a regular basis and if you register on the repository, you will get notifications of any new uploads.

You are also most welcome to comment on this (and previous) ODL Communiqués on the Unisa Staff website. On the right hand side of the Unisa Staff website, you will see a section titled "Important links" under which you must then click on "Blogs". On the blog page, you will notice two links namely "E-connect" and "Open Distance Learning". If you follow the latter you will be able to read and comment on the ODL Communiqués.

Drafted by Dr Paul Prinsloo
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20 July 2010

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Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this ODL Communiqué represent my personal viewpoints and do not represent the viewpoint of any other member of the Unisa community.

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The Institute for Open & Distance Learning
presents the

4th ODL Occasional Lecture Series 2010
on

'Social Software, Social Networks, and Online Distance Learning'

This presentation critically analyses the significant use of various social software and social networks in teaching and learning. It contributes towards the transformation of individual and social identities in a community of practice. The technologies and networks are basically online, and therefore, have the greatest potentiality to facilitate/influence learning which is web–based as well as online. Within a framework of online learning, the placement of open source social technologies and networks is reflected and critically examined from a constructivist pedagogic perspective, and from the viewpoint of inclusion/exclusion and authentic knowledge."

by Professor Santosh Panda
University of the South Pacific, Fiji Islands

Professor Panda started university teaching as a Lecturer in Education in the early 1980s; and moved to the National Open University in India to rise to a full Professor of Distance Education in 1997, and consequently, the Director of its Staff Training & Research Institute of Distance Education. Besides a Doctorate in Education, he has a Certificate in Ed TV from BBC, UK; Certificate in Online Teaching from University of Maryland, USA; and has been a Senior Fulbright Scholar at the University of New Mexico, USA. Prior to his current responsibility as Director, Centre for Flexible & Distance Learning, University of the South Pacific, he has been Director of Policy & Research at Association of Indian Universities; Director of Inter–University Consortium for Technology–Enabled Education at IGNOU; He has visited, lectured, presented invited keynotes, and conducted workshops in about 24 countries and he sits in the Editorial Board of various journals. He has extensively published in the areas of open, distance, and online learning!

Thursday, 29 July 2010

10:00 -12:00

VENUE: Senate Hall, Theo van Wijk Building, Unisa Main Campus

Light lunch will be served.
RSVP before 26 July
Santa Parsons: parsocs@unisa.ac.za
Enquiries: (012) 429-3250/56

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