



ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 25, 4 AUGUST 2010

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1 THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE

Last week Dr Roger Mills, the Chairperson of the Unisa ODL International Advisory Group visited Unisa and had discussions with several stakeholders and different groups on the state and future of ODL at Unisa. In 2005, he was co-author of a report for the Commonwealth of Learning titled “The art of the possible: issues of learner support in open and distance learning in low income countries” (Creed, C., Allsop, T., Mills, R. & Morpeth, R.) (available from <http://www.col.org/SiteCollectionDocuments/05ArtofPossible.pdf>, accessed 3 August 2010).

I don’t necessarily want to reflect on the contents of what he and his co-authors have explored in this work, but rather reflect on the title of the document, and the rationale for them writing the document. Creed et al (2005:10), like the work of Kember (2007) to which I referred to in a previous communiqué (ODL Communiqué 22, 14 July), propose that models of student support based on “Western models” in ODL often are not appropriate to other contexts such as low-income countries with different cultures and infrastructures. The gist of the document “The art of the possible” is to take seriously what a specific country and context has to offer and then to realise whatever *is possible* in that context.

Thinking about the challenges that Unisa faces with regard to offering appropriate and effective student support, using a range of technologies, responsible minimum admission requirements and alternative pathways (to mention a few); many of us may be overwhelmed by the immensity of the task facing us, and many of us may feel that we don’t have enough information, at present, to take big steps. The fact that the technologies that are en vogue today may be obsolete in two to three year’s time, may paralyse us and prevent us from doing “what is possible” and taking small incremental steps.

Kay (2010) in his book “Obliquity. Why our goals are best achieved indirectly” explores the challenges of making decisions in complex environments when we just don’t know enough and where what we know today will change due to interdependencies and inter-relationships between different role-players. Kay (2007:98) suggests that almost “all real problems are incompletely and imperfectly specified, and to tackle them *we have to try to close them in some way*. Closure means deciding what to bring in and what to leave out”. He warns that often we have the illusion that “we have more control over our lives than we possess, that we understand more about the world and the future than we do or can” (Kay 2010:127). And this is why, if I understand him correctly, obliquity or indirect ways are often better than direct, confrontational ways. In circumstances where our objectives are often “multiple, incommensurable, and partly incompatible”, where the consequences of what we do depend on responses that we cannot predict and where the systems we plan in are “too complex for us to fully understand” (Kay 2010:141), smaller, incremental steps which allows for adaptation as we progress, may be better than a ‘big bang’ approach. Sounds to me like the art of the possible.

Kay (2010:172) warns that because of the interdependencies and inter-relationships in complex systems, “a good decision doesn’t necessarily lead to a good outcome, and a good outcome doesn’t necessarily imply a good decision or a capable decision maker”. Kay (2010:172) therefore suggests that the “notion of the best solution may itself be misconceived”. He concludes:

When faced with a task that daunts you, a project that you find difficult, *begin by doing something*. Choose a small component that seems potentially relevant to the task. While it seems to make sense to plan everything before you start, mostly you can’t: objectives are not clearly enough defined, the nature of the problem keeps shifting, it is too complex, and you lack sufficient information (Kay 2010:175; emphasis added).

What can we do at Unisa, now, to really make a difference in the working lives of *our staff* that would give them a sense of *eudaimonia*, meaning quality of life, a sense of flourishing, a fulfilling of their potential (Kay 2010:40)? What small steps can we implement that can increase the sense of flourishing among our students? What is possible, now? Deciding on those indirect ways may require us to try to close some problems into smaller chunks and take incremental steps which will allow us to adapt as we progress (Kay 2007:98).

2 THINKING CRITICALLY...

As the ODL implementation unfolds, it is necessary to think critically about what we do and how we do it. It is even more critical (and difficult) to think about the reasons *why* we do certain things, have certain structures and how our current structures allow us to respond to challenges that are different from the challenges when these structures were formed.

Since 1916 when the University of the Cape of Good Hope changed to become the University of South Africa (Unisa), many things have changed. I can imagine that when the changes were proposed that there were fears and that the affected departments and individuals most probably questioned the rationale behind the motives for these changes. While many of the changes looked good at the time, history often judged them less favourably. And many of the decisions that were very unpopular at the time of their implementation were proven, in retrospect, to be right on target.

Some of the dramatic changes I can think of during the past number of years are, for example, the decision to move to Pretoria in 1918; changing to correspondence teaching in 1946; the merger in 2004; semesterisation in 2006; and opting to become a fully fledged ODL institution in 2007. Where using audio tapes was 'cutting edge' distance education practice in the 1980s and 1990s very few modules still use audio tapes.

The reason why I refer to these changes is that as we grow to acknowledge the complexities of being an ODL institution in a complex and fast-changing world becomes apparent, some of our assumptions, beliefs and practices will (and should) be scrutinised. The danger is that we may cling to some of our assumptions, beliefs, structures and practices just because they used to be 'true' and appropriate in a specific time and context. Maybe it is time to tackle some of the challenges courageously, and fearlessly?

3 PLANS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE SENATE DECISION REGARDING THE RECORDING OF ALL VIDEO AND SATELLITE BROADCAST SESSIONS

On 2 June Senate decided that all video conferencing (VC) and Satellite Broadcast (SB) sessions have to be recorded and provided free of charge to all students registered for the module in question. A small working committee had two meetings so far and we are happy to report on the following progress made:

- Based on the estimates of this year's sessions, an estimated 130 000 to 140 000 recordings will be sent to students in 2011. This is expected to make a huge impact to ensure that all students have access to these VC and SB sessions.
- In order to increase the effectiveness of these recorded sessions, a number of initiatives are considered such as providing lecturers with clear guidelines with regard to planning the recordings more carefully to minimise the need to post-event editing and also to increase the pedagogical effectiveness of the recordings.
- To ensure that all academics of the different colleges have equal access to these technologies, the booking system will be redesigned and colleges informed well-ahead of time.
- Issues of branding, copyright and quality assurance will be clarified with all stakeholders.

- With all students having access to recordings of those sessions, it becomes crucial to ensure that the sessions are integrated into the core teaching, learning and assessment plans of the modules as well as responding to specific student needs in interactive ways, instead of being general “talking head” introductions. There are already some excellent examples to build on – let us raise the standard even further!

The team will finalise the draft guidelines in consultation with various stakeholders and submit the proposed guidelines for discussion to the STLSC meeting of September 2010. I would like to thank the members of the working committee: Ms Irene Chadibe (ICT), Mr Jonas Hlongwane (Video and Teleconferencing), Mr Kingsley Mokomane (Telematic Delivery), Ms Theresa Mihalik (Sound, Video, and Photography), Mr Wessie van der Westhuizen (Sound, Video, and Photography), Mr Jason Ming Sun (ICT) and Mr Zayed Bagus (Despatch).

4 BEING AN ACADEMIC IN AN UNFLAT WORLD

The DCLD will host their fourth Conversation Forum for 2010 on **5 August**, in Pretoria, (Miriam Makeba Concert Hall) from **9:30-11:30** and on **6 August** in Florida (Genmin) from **9:30-11:30**. What does *being* an academic mean in an unflat world where...?

- the number of private knowledge producers is increasing;
- the number of international higher education institutions entering the South African higher education landscape is on the rise;
- many students have access to open educational resources with the “same’ (or better) content that we cover (and uncover) in our study guides;
- we need to Africanise our curriculum in an increasingly global marketplace;
- there is a disturbing trend to appoint academics on a contract basis;
- many students adapt more easily to using a range of new technologies than their lecturers;
- academics find it increasingly hard to keep up-to-date with new developments in their disciplines while balancing this with increasing administrative duties *and* using a range of new technologies;
- academics are required to negotiate with more and more stakeholders on what should be taught and how to teach it;
- the curse of ubiquitous connectivity – with online and mobile technologies, what happened to “family” or “not-in-the-office” time?
- academics often have to endure the brunt of managerialism in the form of detailed performance agreements and appraisals, ten-year development plans, an increase in administrative duties, continuous reporting on what they did, why they did that and not numerous other things, etc.

This forum will explore, amongst other questions, the following:

- What will being an academic in the next few years be like?
- How can/should academics prepare themselves for teaching in an unflat world?
- What kind of support do academics need in an increasingly unflat world?

The panel for the Pretoria Conversation Forum will consist of **Prof Irma Kroeze** (Jurisprudence), **Mr Nebbel Motubatse** (Auditing) and **Prof Derik Gelderblom** (Sociology). The panel for the Conversation Forum in Florida will consist of **Ms Elna van Niekerk** (Environmental Sciences), **Mr John Kole** (Criminology and Security Science) and **Mr Rudi Pretorius** (Geography).

Bookings for the Forums on **both** campuses can be done by sending an e-mail to Ms Liz van der Westhuizen (vdwesesj@unisa.ac.za) or reserve a seat by phoning her at 012-429 6244.

5 IMPORTANT DATES

On **Thursday 5 August** from 14:00-15:30 there will be a meeting of all interested parties in TVW 10-24 (Kopanong) on discussing guidelines for lecturers with regard to issues of Intellectual Property, copyright and social networking. Guidelines will be drafted and will serve at the STLSC meeting in September 2010.

Please take note that the meeting on offering higher certificates planned for **Friday 6 August** has been postponed to **10 August**, from 12:00-14:00 in TVW10-24 (Kopanong). As we would like to provide a light lunch, representatives from the colleges who plan to attend this meeting should please inform Ms Tshoanelo Mokoena (PA to the ODL Project) at mokoets@unisa.ac.za.

A joint meeting of identified members of **ODL Task teams 4 and 6** will take place on Thursday **10 August** from 14:00-16:00 in ORT 8-14.

The next meeting of **ODL Task team 1** will take place on **11 August**, 11:30-13:00 in TVW10-24 (Kopanong). As we would like to provide a light lunch, representatives from the colleges who plan to attend this meeting should please inform Ms Tshoanelo Mokoena (PA to the ODL Project) at mokoets@unisa.ac.za.

6 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 3 August 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

ODL Coordinator

Office of the Vice-Principal: Academic & Research, Unisa

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+27 (0) 12 4293683 (office), +27 (0) 823954113 (mobile), prinsp@unisa.ac.za

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.