

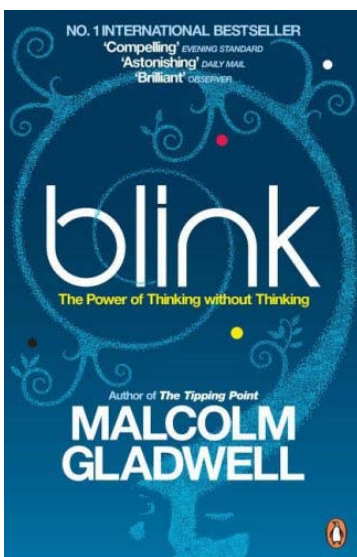


## ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 26, 11 AUGUST 2010

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### 1 WHEN LESS IS MORE...



Last year I discovered Malcolm Gladwell's book, called 'Outliers' (2008) which opened my eyes to a gifted author who has the ability to share fresh (and delightful) takes on familiar problems.

Since then I read "Blink" (2006) and "What the dog saw" (2009). In his book "Blink. The power of thinking without thinking" (2006) Gladwell explores how often our intuitive 'knowing' is more accurate than many time-consuming and very elaborate explorations of complex problems. He explores a number of examples, ranging from judging the authenticity of an 'antique' Greek sculpture bought by the J. Paul Getty Museum, predicting break-up of couples, playing war games, and predicting heart attacks, to mention a few.

Gladwell (2006) suggests that when we approach complex phenomena we often think that if we *have more data we may be able to plan better*. Often we want to analyse a specific problem from another angle just to make sure we are on the 'right' track; survey yet another sample, or (worse) visit another overseas institution to find 'best practices' to copy and paste into our context.

Gladwell (2006:136) states that "extra information isn't actually an advantage at all; that, in fact, you need to know very little to find the underlying signature of a complex phenomenon". He goes further... "extra information is more than useless. It's harmful. It confuses issues. What screws up doctors when they are trying to predict heart attacks is that they take *too much* information into account" (2006:137). *Often having more information increases the confidence in teams making predictions but their accuracy gets less...* (Gladwell 2006:139).

Gladwell (2006:141) summarises two lessons from this. The first lesson is that “truly successful decision making relies on a balance between deliberate and instinctive thinking”. The second lessons he phrases as follows: “...in good decision making, frugality matters” (2006:141). When complex problems are reduced “to its simplest elements” we discover “an identifiable underlying pattern”. Having too much information, “makes picking up that signature harder, not easier. To be a successful decision maker, we have to edit” (Gladwell 2006:142). The problem with having too many choices, is that “you are forced to consider much more than your unconscious is comfortable with” with the result that “you get paralysed” (Gladwell 2006:143).

I personally don’t think that Malcolm Gladwell would support acting without evidence that what you plan to do will really make a difference. This approach is often called ‘bang-bang management’ – shooting in the dark at *any* sound. I suspect there may be a number of examples of ‘bang-bang management’ at Unisa – where decisions were/are taken without evidence that the planned interventions are indeed focused on ‘real’ problems. But there is another problem that Gladwell (2006) points out and that is our reliance on yet *another* study, yet *another* sample, yet *another* benchmarking visit – while the underlying signature of the problem is actually visible for all to see.

The team working on a conceptual model to understand and predict student success at Unisa tabled a very comprehensive (and complex) model which won international and national acclaim and recognition wherever it was presented. The number of variables and the interrelationships and interdependencies between the different variables at different phases of the student walk is mind-boggling. The team proposed (and I still agree) that the more we know about our students, the better we can plan and offer support. And the more our students know about us, the better *they* can plan and be prepared for what their studies will require of them.

Having said that, this does not mean that we cannot act unless we know more, on the contrary. I suspect that we most probably know the ‘signature’ of student failure or drop-out. Without negating the complexity of the student success puzzle, how much more do we need to know in order to act?

## 2 **PREFERABLE FUTURES**

At the beginning of the year I attended an online conference hosted by the *Beyond Distance Research Alliance* (University of Leicester) with the theme “Learning Futures Festival”. In one of the first sessions, Prof Phillip Candy, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Global Learning spoke on what the future holds for higher education. He referred to three futures, namely *possible* futures, *probable* futures and *preferable* futures. He continued to add that the issue is not predicting which of those futures will happen, but *planning for preferable futures*.

There are many uncertainties regarding what the future of teaching and learning at Unisa may look like. There are possible futures filled with all kinds of 'goodies', new technologies, scenes from Star Trek, and so on. Then there are the probable futures which may or may not be less positive and more realistic. And then there is the preferable future – *what would we prefer the future to be like?*

What I like about this approach is the aspect of locus of control – while a lot of what will or may happen in future is not within our control, a lot is. The issue is not prediction, but planning for what we prefer to have in the future.

### **3 SHORT NEWS ITEMS**

- 3.1 There was an open invitation for staff with an interest in Intellectual Property, copyright and social networking to meet to discuss and explore the possibility to develop guidelines for staff (and in particular academic staff) regarding the issues involved when online networking sites are used for teaching purposes. The team had two meetings so far and will submit draft guidelines to the Unisa community for comment before the end of August. We hope to submit a concrete proposal to the STLSC of September 2010.
- 3.2 Meeting with the regions: I am in the process of finalising meeting the regional directors as soon as possible, as well as having a workshop with representatives of the regional staff regarding the implications of the ODL implementation for the regions. Watch this space!
- 3.3 There was a meeting of interested colleges and departments regarding the development of a generic higher certificate which will also contain college specific elements. We have made progress and it was decided that ODL Task team 1 will take this forward as part of the bigger re-visioning of minimum admission requirements and creating alternative pathways for students.
- 3.4 The joint meetings of individuals of ODL Task teams 4 and 6 have made huge progress regarding several issues. Under the leadership of Prof George Subotzky we have realised that the two teams share the responsibility to implement concrete steps towards increasing student success and retention. Against this backdrop, student support plays a vital role. It is envisaged that the whole team of both groups will meet soon to discuss progress made and to plot the next steps.

### **4 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 11 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.

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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.