

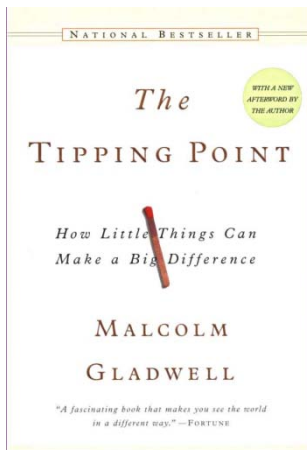


## ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 34, 13 OCTOBER 2010

### IN THIS ISSUE:

- 1 *The tipping point: How little things can make a big difference*
- 2 *Report back on a visit to the University of Leicester*
- 3 *A celebration of innovation in teaching and learning at Unisa, 29 October 2010*
- 4 *ODL Communiqué 33, 6 October*
- 5 *ODL Repository and blog*

### 1 **THE TIPPING POINT: HOW LITTLE THINGS CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE**



In the previous ODL Communiqué, I reflected on an essay by John P Kotter “Leading change: why transformation efforts fail” (Harvard Business Review, 2006). I found the essay illuminating, because we all plan (big and small) transformations, often just to see it fail.

But there is another aspect of organisational change that is worth considering, namely *how little things can often make a big difference*.

One of my favourite authors, Malcolm Gladwell, published a book in 2000 with the title “The tipping point” in which he explores the phenomenon of a tipping point and the characteristics of a number of trends and epidemics which spread, often against all odds (or according to Gladwell – *because* of certain odds). Gladwell proposes (2000:9) that epidemics share three characteristics namely contagiousness, the fact that “little causes can have big effects” and that “change happens not gradually but in one dramatic moment”, namely a tipping point.

What would be the tipping point for Unisa’s ODL strategy? What would be the tipping point for the appropriate use of technology to become embedded in *everything* we do? What would be the tipping point in the service we provide to our students – ranging from the Unisa Call Centre to face-to-face tutorials, and so forth? In his book, Gladwell (2000:19) explores the roles of “three agents of change” namely “the law of the few”, the “stickiness factor” and the “power of context”. The first characteristic Gladwell (2000:21) discusses is the fact that epidemics are driven by a few exceptional “carriers” or viruses and Gladwell proposes that organisational change also depends on a few exceptional individuals or “carriers” that have a combination of sociable, energetic, knowledgeable and influential characteristics.

The message of these “carriers” should also be “sticky” enough to prevent the message from being lost. And then finally, the last crucial element in allowing an epidemic to spread is the impact of the immediate environment which can either kill the first green sprouts of change, or nurture them to grow beyond all expectations.

When dramatic change happens, according to Gladwell (2000:38), it can firstly be attributed to a number of connectors – “people with a special gift of bringing the world together”. And it is not only the *number* of people that these connectors know, but importantly the “kinds of people they know” (2000:46). The “Connectors” have the ability to span different worlds which is a combination of their personality, curiosity, self-confidence, sociability and energy (2000:49). These people not only have feet in different worlds, *but the ability to bring these worlds together* (2000:51).

But word-of-mouth epidemics are also the result of “mavens” – a Yiddish word for someone who accumulates knowledge (2000:60) – not as passive collectors of information, but once these Mavens have collected the information, they allow the information to flow through (2000:62). “What sets Mavens apart is not so much what they know but how they pass it along” (2000:67). Mavens, according to Gladwell (2000:69) are not persuaders, but more like teachers or “information brokers, sharing and trading in what they know”. “Mavens are data banks. They provide the message. Connectors are social glue: they spread it” (2000:70).

The third type of person to complete this trio of change agents is a salesperson, “with the skills to persuade us when we are unconvinced of what we are hearing, and they are as critical to the tipping of word-of-mouth epidemics as the other two groups” (2000:70). In epidemics the messenger matters as much as the sticky messages (2000:92). If the message fails to stick, there will be no epidemic (2000:93).

The third element in a social epidemic, according to Gladwell (2000:133), is the power of context. Some contexts are conducive to an epidemic, while other conditions are totally unfavourable. It is therefore crucial to create circumstances in which social epidemics can flourish and thrive. If you want to create lasting change in people’s beliefs and values, you need to create a community around them where those “new beliefs could be practiced and expressed and nurtured” (2000:173). The size of these new communities matter (see Gladwell 2000:174-188) because the size of the group shapes the ability of the group to develop a “joint memory system” (2000:188) valuing shared beliefs and practices. Gladwell (2000:258) concludes that what “must underlie successful epidemics, in the end, is a *bedrock belief that change is possible*, that people can radically transform their behaviour or beliefs in the face of the right kind of impetus” (emphasis added).

Personally, I wish there was a more positive metaphor for organisational change than reference to epidemics. The scourge of the Aids epidemic on the one hand, and epidemics of intolerance such as found in the Rwandan holocaust, has tainted using the metaphor for me forever. Having said that, in following Gladwell (2000), the unfolding of epidemics *do* provide some pointers for understanding organisational change, and more importantly, planning for it.

If I think of the implementation of ODL at Unisa, it would seem as if we would need the three types of people that Gladwell describes – the Connectors, the Mavens and the Salespersons. The second element would be to create a really sticky message – one that would bring the institution to a standstill, encouraging understanding and then, importantly, creating the initial positive response. But equally important is the importance to create an enabling environment to support the changes. And it is this last bit that makes me wonder the most....

I attended a meeting of a certain college Learner Support committee this past week, and a number of remarks made me wonder to what extent Unisa provides a supportive and enabling environment to our academics to be *the kind of teachers they want to be*? As ODL starts to move into implementation mode and a number of initiatives are about to be launched, we will need a supportive and enabling environment to support academics (and Unisa staff in general). It is so easy to add more activities to academics performance agreements. It is so easy to demand more. It is often not so easy to understand the sense of being overwhelmed that many academics experience.

If we don't seriously consider the importance of context, the demands of ODL will be the straw that breaks the camel's back. Gladwell's (2000) book provides me with hope that small things *can* make a huge difference. What will be the tipping point for ODL at Unisa?

## 2 REPORT BACK ON A VISIT TO THE UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER

A small team from Unisa visited the University of Leicester from 4-8 October 2010. The team included Prof Peter Havenga (Executive Director: Academic Planning), Dr Leonie Steyn (Education Consultant, DCLD), Dr Mpine Makoe (IODL), Mr Jason Ming Sun (Deputy Director, Portal and Academic System Design, ICT) and Dr Paul Prinsloo (ODL Coordinator). The team visited the Beyond Distance Research Alliance (BDRA) who is instrumental in mainstreaming the effective and appropriate use of technologies at the University of Leicester.



The visit was well organised and both the Unisa team and their hosts expressed satisfaction with the visit and several possibilities for future collaboration. Despite some differences between Unisa and the University of Leicester (such as number of students and academic offerings as well as the fact that they subscribe to Blackboard as learning platform) there are a number of transferrable ideas to seriously consider such as

- (i) The University of Leicester strategically committed resources (in the person of Prof Gilly Salmon and the BDRA) and structures (the BDRA) to mainstream evidence-based educational use of a range of technologies. There seems to be an urgent need for a guiding coalition to take Unisa forward to infuse all teaching and learning with effective and appropriate use of technologies.
- (ii) The lure of the exotic. It is very easy to be lured to only think about the latest, flashiest, most colourful (and add to the list) of technologies when we are thinking about increasing the effectiveness of teaching and learning. While the University of Leicester does allocate resources to research the latest and flashiest, they commit themselves to a basic principle namely “low cost, high impact”.
- (iii) Though there is a need to increase the general competencies of Unisa’s academic staff in the making use of a range of technologies, it would seem as if just-in-time training in the context of application and on a need to know basis form the best basis for training in optimising the use of technologies in teaching and learning. Training provided should be immediately applied in module contexts and evidence gathered regarding its impact.
- (iv) The BDRA is committed to collect evidence as they implement innovative approaches. *All* their projects have a research element. This differs greatly from some initiatives at Unisa which are implemented without evidence or an effort to collect evidence.
- (v) The course design process implemented by the BDRA provides a well-designed, transferable pedagogically sound structure to plot the effective use of technologies in modules.
- (vi) There is an urgent need for Unisa to increase the allocation of resources to research and development. The interesting tension between mainstreaming new and sustainable technologies and remaining at the cutting edge of developments and applications seems to be healthy. While there is a dire need at Unisa to mainstream technology, we should consciously create well-resourced and strategically placed space for innovation.

- (vii) Unisa needs a well-equipped physical space as part of a well-designed e-learning strategy can have on institutional praxis.
- (viii) Unisa can use podcasts more often and in also in a variety of applications and uses. *Audacity* (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>) is a free tool with which podcasts can be recorded with very little training. The use of *Audacity* as standard tool should be encouraged and normalised before the end of 2011. It is achievable to aim that every module at Unisa will have at least five podcasts on their *myUnisa* sites by end of 2011 – a welcome message, info and guidance about each of the two compulsory assignments, feedback after both assignments and info and guidance regarding the examination.
- (ix) While increasing the general connectivity of our students should be a strategic priority, most of our students already have access to mobile technologies. There should be a dedicated effort to optimise the affordances of mobile technologies in the service of increasing the effectiveness of teaching and learning. We have no excuse.

A full report on the visit with some recommendations is in the process of being drafted and will be circulated to the Unisa community before the end of October 2010.



From left to right (back row): Paul Prinsloo, Sandra Romenska, Gilly Salmon, Mpine Makoe, Peter Havenga, Teresa Bird, Jason Ming Sun, and Ale Armellini. Front row: Simon Kear, Ming Nie, Leonie Steyn, Pal Edirisingha and Paul Rudman

### **3 A CELEBRATION OF INNOVATION IN TEACHING AND LEARNING AT UNISA, 29 OCTOBER 2010**

All Unisa staff is invited to a celebration of innovation in teaching and learning at Unisa on 29 October 2010 in the Dr Miriam Makeba Concert Hall, on the Pretoria campus from 08:30 - 13:30.

At this event we will celebrate innovative practices in teaching and learning ranging from the use of tutors, E-tutors, Mxit and other social media, portfolios, satellite broadcasts and video conferencing, etc. As we would like to provide lunch for everyone attending the event, it is essential that you book a place by sending an e-mail to the Project Administrator of the ODL Project, Ms Tshoanelo Mokoena, [mokoets@unisa.ac.za](mailto:mokoets@unisa.ac.za).

The tentative programme looks as follows:

<b>08:00</b>	<i>Coffee/Tea</i>	
<b>08:30</b>	Official Welcome	Prof MC Maré, Vice Principal: Academic & Research
<b>08:45</b>	Overview of the programme	Dr Paul Prinsloo, ODL Coordinator
<b>08:55</b>	The role of E-Tutors in teaching End-user Computing	Ms Klarissa Engelbrecht, Computing
<b>09:15</b>	Face-to-face tutors: the Science Foundation Programme	Mr Felix Fushai, SFP Coordinator Ms Michelle van Wyk, Geography
<b>09:35</b>	Using Mxit in supporting students	Ms Annelien van Rooyen, Financial Accounting
<b>09:55</b>	Virtual tutors in teaching Micro-economics	Mr Bernard Serfontein (Economics) Mr Willie le Roux (Economics)
<b>10:15</b>	Open discussion	
<b>10:30</b>	<i>Tea/coffee</i>	
<b>11:00</b>	Using portfolios in assessment	Mr Rudi Pretorius (Geography)
<b>11:20</b>	Using podcasts in the teaching of Taxation	Ms Kerry de Hart (Taxation)
<b>11:40</b>	Using social media	Mr Denzil Chetty (Religious Studies)
<b>12:00</b>	Using myUnisa	Ms Dalize van Heerden (Computing)
<b>12:20</b>	Open discussion: Towards the future: strategic choices to support innovation in teaching and learning	
<b>13:00</b>	Response 1	Prof Peter Havenga (Executive Director: Academic Planner)
<b>13:10</b>	Response 2	Prof Pam Ryan (Executive Director, Office of the Pro Vice Chancellor)
<b>13:20</b>	Closure	Dr Paul Prinsloo, ODL Coordinator
<b>13:30</b>	<i>Lunch</i>	

Don't miss this opportunity to celebrate and engage with some of the trend-setters in teaching and learning at Unisa!

#### 4 ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 33, 6 OCTOBER

Although ODL Communiqué 33, dated 6 October was circulated via e-mail to the Unisa community, a glitch resulted in the communiqué not being posted to the E-News of last week. The communiqué is available on the ODL repository (link below), or else send an e-mail to [prinsp@unisa.ac.za](mailto:prinsp@unisa.ac.za) and I will gladly share this communiqué with you!

#### 5 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 October 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  
12 October 2010

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