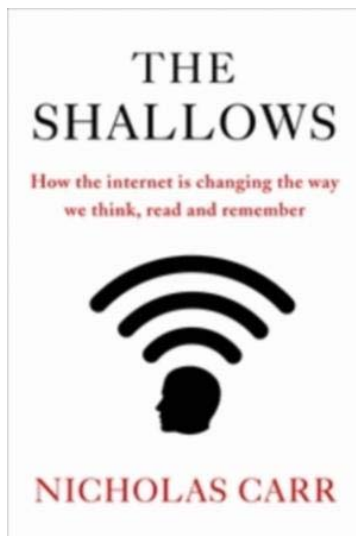# ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 36, 27 OCTOBER 2010

IN THIS ISSUE:

1   THE SHALLOWS. HOW THE INTERNET IS CHANGING THE WAY WE THINK, READ AND REMEMBER

If you are teaching at Unisa, you may consider reading this book. Unisa is at present at a tipping point with regard to the way (and the reasons why) we use technologies. Up to now we developed study guides based on the assumption of linear reading patterns and activities following on preceding activities and units of reading building onto previous units. There was a clear progression between the beginning of the guide and the end. There was an end. Enter the internet…

Nicholas Carr (2010) in his book "The shallows. How the internet is changing the way we think, read and remember" provides an extensive overview of how technologies throughout the ages changed not only knowledge and knowledge production, but also *how* we learned, and *how* and *what* we remembered. The one question he does not attempt to address in his book, is how all of this shaped and shapes *the way we teach*…

In the prologue to his book, Carr (2010:3) moots the statement that technologies throughout the ages have not only provided us with windows onto the world and onto ourselves, but technologies have also shaped *"who we are, as individuals and as a society"* (emphasis added). Every medium, throughout the ages, changed us. The internet is no exception. The internet "is so much our servant that it would seem churlish to notice that it is also our master" (Carr 2010:4).

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I find the reflections of Carr (2010) anything but sensational or overstated but rather very sober, pragmatic and at times very personal making sense of the impact of the internet. Reflecting on the fact that his own concentration in reading longer passages is becoming increasingly more difficult, Carr (2010:7) writes: "Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski". Instead of reading, Carr (2010:8) states that he now skims more than he reads, he scrolls through text, and follows hyperlinks … and gets lost. But it is not all negative. He refers to another author (Karp) who says "The Internet may have made me a less patient reader, but I think that in many ways, it has made me smarter. More connections to documents, artefacts, and people means more external influences on my thinking and thus on my writing" (2010:8).

Reading books from cover to cover now seems like a waste of time, when you can actually find a greater variety on the web… and much faster. Carr (2010:10), in following the work of McLuhan, states that we are at an important juncture of our cultural and intellectual history "a moment of transition between two very different modes of thinking". Linear reading and thinking which were calm, "focused, undistracted" have been "pushed aside by a new kind of mind that wants and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, often overlapping bursts – the faster, the better" (Carr 2010:10). In one of the most powerful paragraphs in the book, Carr (2010:12) reflects on how being surrounded by thousands of books never resulted in him feeling anxious or having a feeling of "information overload". "There was something calming in the reticence of all those books, their willingness to wait years, decades even, for the right reader to come along and pull them from their appointed slots. *Take your time*, the books whispered to me in their dusty voices. *We're not going anywhere*" (Carr 2010:12; italics in the original). Now there is a constant anxiety that if you are not connected, you may miss the latest newsflash or gossip. Now our brains have become constantly hungry … "and the more it was fed, the hungrier it became" (Carr 2010:16). Our brains now demand to be connected, all the time, to be fed, with byte sizes (excuse the pun) of information, soon to be discarded for the next byte.

The gist of Carr's (2010) book is the statement that whatever technologies humanity has used throughout the ages, that using them resulted in our brains reorganising circuits in order to adapt to the tools we used (the notion of neuroplasticity). "Sometimes our tools do what we tell them to do. *Other times, we adapt ourselves to our tool's requirements*" (Carr 2010:47; emphasis added). It would therefore benefit us all if we seriously consider how technological advancements act as turning points in history. "In large measure, civilization has assumed its current form as a result of the technologies people have come to use". (Carr 2010:48)(See Carr's wonderful discussion of the discussion between the Egyptian god Theuth and Thamus on page 54).

Carr (2010:90) further reflects on reading online texts in which the text is broken up into searchable chunks, with hyperlinks, and links to other media – and all of this changes the way we "use, experience, and even understand content".

He continues "[t]he shift from paper to screen doesn't just change the way we navigate a piece of writing. It also influences the degree of attention we devote to it and the depth of our immersion in it" (Carr 2010:90). Hyperlinks in particular disrupt our traditional way of making sense of reading (and content). Links

> …don't just point us to related or supplemental works; *they propel us toward them*. They encourage us to dip in and out of a series of texts rather than devote sustained attention to any one of them. Hyperlinks are designed to grab your attention. Their value as navigational tools is inextricable from the distraction they cause" (Carr 2010:90; emphasis added).

Our attention spans become provisional and fragmented. "We don't see the forest when we search the Web. We don't even see the trees. We see twigs and leaves" (Carr 2010:91). The internet, according to Cory Doctorow (quoted by Carr 2010:91), is an "ecosystem of interruption technologies". This results in us all developing a "juggler's brains" (Carr 2010:115). Also see Carr's discussions on the "church of Google" (2010:149), and how the internet shapes searching for content and, sequentially, our memory… (Carr 2010:177). In his last chapter, Carr (2010:201) reflects on how the internet has shaped and is shaping our unique capacity *to be human*, our capacity for emotion, empathy, self-awareness (2010:207). Carr (2010:222) pleads, just before the epilogue to his book, for us to resist welcoming into our souls the "frenziedness" the internet brings.

As I read the book (and I am going back again and again to read some passages), I wonder whether Unisa is ready for the evolution the internet brings to teaching and learning? When the world around us has become non-linear, hyperlinked with byte sizes of content, interspersed with multimedia, will we still teach (and assess) as if the internet has not happened? How will we teach in an age where the frenziedness of new information will demand attention in our curricula and teaching strategies? How will our curricula and the way we teach and assess, assist students to be human in an age where the shallow, the latest and the most recent abound and where moments of fulfilment are but fading apparitions between hyperlinks?

2   ON THE TIGHTROPE BETWEEN THE CENTRE AND THE PERIPHERY: MUCKLENEUK, FLORIDA AND THE REGIONS

Trying to map the role of the regional facilities at Unisa in an age which will see us making more use of the affordances of technology, is like walking on a tightrope. And the watching crowd resembles those hungry-for-action crowds of the Roman circuses where a crowd could determine whether the slave will live or die (despite having conquered ravenous predators or being outnumbered by other gladiators).

Mapping the relationships, tensions, assumptions, beliefs, and even animosity between the Muckleneuk and Florida campuses, between the regions and the centre (whether at Muckleneuk and/or Florida), between the centre and those who are seen or see themselves as being on the periphery… is not for the faint-hearted. To solve the issue of the regions in a networked world will be for those with hope, courage and stubbornness.

Often the way we talk about the 'centre' and the regions imply that the real power is *in the centre* and that those on the periphery are only required to dance to the tunes of those in the centre. For the sake of this reflection I will refer to the centre to mean the 'place' and the 'people' who make decisions regarding the strategic direction and objectives of Unisa.

There are claims that 'they' (meaning the centre) do not consult. There are claims that the centre do not know what it is like in the regions. There are claims that though the centre thinks the self-help option during registration is working, that those in the regions know how students struggle to use the self-help and that the self-help is actually a misnomer. Students, according to 'them' (those in the regions), either lack the literacies to navigate successfully the online registration system, or the number of pre-requisites, co-requisites, and curricula are just too complex for the 'uninitiated' to find their way through. The centre furthermore makes decisions about closing dates and don't face the crowds that arrive from the rural areas still wanting to register. The centre makes decisions regarding fees and prescribed books. The centre makes decisions regarding the central posting of all study materials and the regions face the complaints. The centre makes decisions regarding what qualifications to offer, which ones to phase out and which ones to continue to offer and the regions doubt the sanity of the decisions. The centre often disregards the face-to-face tutorials offered in the regions and sends the 'real' academics to the regions to provide the Light to those living in the darkness. The centre dreams of being the powerhouse of ideas with humble and subservient employees in the regions who will do as they are told. And then there are those in the centre who uses the centre for personal dreams and aspirations of power and careers.

I can go on. It is claimed that the centre dictates and the regions are the lesser partners who bear the brunt of those decisions.

Then there are the realities, dreams and counter-claims of those in the regions – the realities of serving (and claiming to serve) students on a daily basis. The reality and dream of making a difference to students who visit the regional facilities often out of last resort because they have given up hope of getting help at the centre; when they were being transferred for umpteenth times from one unhelpful person (or willing to help but not able to) to the next. The regions speak of a reality of staff often trying to help students who get assignments back (which they have failed) and in which there is not even one 'tick' or one comment to provide guidance regarding where the student missed an important point.

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The regions also dream of doing their own marketing and growing their regional centres. There are dreams of creating centres of wellness for those students and their families affected by unemployment, HIV and Aids and/or the scourge of poverty. There are dreams of community engagement projects where the Big University can become engaged in the small communities it claims to serve. There are also dreams of creating mini-universities with academics allocated to the regions. And then there *may* also be the constant lure of power for power-hungry individuals.

I can go on. It is claimed that the regions serve at the coal-face of teaching and learning with very little consultation or appreciation of those in the centre.

I cannot and do not want to judge. The ODL implementation plan for 2010 has foreseen that we could open up the issue of the roles, functions and structures of the regions. And central to the question of the roles, functions and structures of the regions *is the question regarding the centre and the periphery, the question of centralisation and decentralisation.*

One way forward is to clarify collaboratively the central focus of the university and *then* to think about the roles of *both* the centre and the regions. If the central vision of Unisa is to be *the* African university in the service of humanity, what is the role of the centre? What are and can the roles of the regions be? If the key foci of higher education are teaching, research and community engagement, how do the regions "fit' into these? If Unisa is committed to break down the strict separation between the "gown" and the "town" – what can the functions of the regions be?

What can the regions do that the centre cannot and should not attempt to do?

What can the centre do that the regions cannot and should not attempt to do?

If Unisa is dedicated to utilise a range of effective pedagogies (please note the plural), where do the regions fit in? If technology is going to become more central in these pedagogies, what are the functions of the regions? If the Library is dedicated to celebrate and optimise Open Educational Resources and electronic books, how does this impact on the regional libraries? If there are students who need and will continue to need face-to-face tutorials, how does this impact on the role of the regions, and more importantly, the appointment and coordination of those tutors and their relationships with the central academics?

We have world-class video and satellite broadcasting facilities and dedicated staff, how can we utilise video and satellite more effectively to break down the notion that these technologies are a one-way street namely pushing information from the centre to the periphery? How can we use video and satellite as a two-way communication between different parts of a bigger whole? How can we use video and satellite for community engagement and research?

If experiential learning is a core part of the Unisa's curricula, what are the roles of the regions?

I can go on. And we should. But maybe the most important question is:

Is there another way of thinking about Unisa rather than thinking 'centre' and 'periphery'? Centre per se signifies power. Periphery per se signifies second-hand, additional, not-centre, sub-alterns.

Maybe the words we use in analysing the dilemmas we face keep us captive like jealous and abusive lovers.

3   RE-IMAGINING STUDENT SUPPORT IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

On Friday 15 October the Department of Organisational and Industrial Psychology gathered at Leriba Lodge to re-imagine student support in their department. Participants took as a point of departure the document "Implementation of the conceptual framework for student support at Unisa" drafted by ODL Task Team 4 (Student Support) and which since served at the STLSC of 18 October where it was approved.

Participants firstly explored factors impacting and shaping student success in the teaching of Industrial and Organisational Psychology. And what a discussion this was! The group generated rich ideas which may form the basis for a very interesting (if not thought-provoking) research article. The group then explored the student profiles in their core modules. A number of interesting aspects were discussed such as the fact that female students outnumber male students almost 2:1, and the huge number of students who are either full-time or employed in the non-formal sector. If students are not formally employed in organisations, how do they make sense of a discipline who attempts to empower them to function in organisations and to fulfil leadership roles in organisations?

The group finally used the framework provided by the document "Implementation of the conceptual framework for student support at Unisa" to plot the academic (cognitive), affective and administrative support students would need from pre-registration to examination. They critically thought about using a variety of technologies such as audio podcasts to provide students with cognitive, affective and administrative support. At the end of the workshop the group was unanimous in stating that the workshop really helped them to re-imagine student support in the teaching of Industrial and Organisational Psychology at Unisa.

Two photographs of lecturers in the Department of Industrial and Organisational Psychology re-imagining student support in their teaching.

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4   A VISION FOR ODL

When I was seconded to the position of being ODL coordinator, many people asked me what my vision for ODL was. As I shared in a previous communiqué, I never could answer this question. From the first week as ODL coordinator I was immersed in getting six representative ODL task teams running and I constantly had to navigate between the legacies of ODL implementation at Unisa, institutional politics, personalities, claims and counter-claims and conflicting visions (and grammars) of what ODL means and should mean.   While the process of implementing ODL at Unisa continues to feel like walking on a tightrope, *a picture of what ODL can be* is emerging. At least for me.

Below is my own *personal* way of making sense of where Unisa as an ODL institution can be by 2015. The below statement does not claim to be the only possible future for ODL at Unisa. It is one possibility. It is also not the final word on what ODL can (or should) be. But it is a start. Here follows my personal vision of Unisa as ODL institution in 2015.

1. Unisa provides **open**, caring and stimulating, centrally and distributed, working and **distance learning** environments in which employees and students flourish and achieve their career and study goals. Open in this context means open and supportive of applied innovation, critical thinking, new horizon-exploration, evidence-based careers, curricula, and research and community engagement.
2. Unisa offers focused and well-structured qualifications which, on completion, result in **open futures** for sought-after and independent graduates making a difference in their communities, places of work and in the world at large.
3. Unisa's admission requirements are appropriately **open** and provide students with a range of supported pathways to reach their potential. Appropriately open refers to admission requirements allow freedom of choice embedded in institutional responsibility to optimise students' chances of success.
4. Unisa is **open** to the communities we serve – the communities of individual students, the communities surrounding the regional facilities, the African and international community who will welcome our students and graduates.
5. Unisa embraces, optimises and supports the affordances of a range of technologies for effective registration, administration and well-designed and technology-enabled teaching and learning.
6. Students have access to a range of online, printed and Face-to-face (F2F) opportunities to assess *their own* potential and readiness and need for resources for studying through ODL and in specific disciplines.
7. All students, undergraduate and postgraduate, have access (from pre-registration to post graduation) to a menu of support services such as
    a. Counselling, academic literacy, career advice, study skills, etc (whether f2f, online, Telematic)
    b. F2F tutorials

c. A personal E-tutor (academic, affective and administrative support)

d. A personal E-mentor (affective support)for coaching and life and study skills

e. Orientation for their studies and examination preparation sessions through F2F, video-conferencing/satellite broadcasting

f. The previous year's examination papers and memoranda – free of charge

g. Receiving from and sending SMSs to Unisa

h. 24/7 technology and system-related support

8. Online registration is easy and supported through well-designed registration processes, generic admission requirements and clear qualification structures.

9. Unisa qualifications make ample and appropriate use of a range of well-designed, effectively integrated, coordinated and supported experiential learning opportunities.

10. After graduation Unisa's alumni become part of a pool of qualified and experienced professionals from which F2F, E-tutors, E-mentors, and full-time employees are drafted.

11. All assignments can be easily submitted online via *my*Unisa using a range of affordable devices.

12. Students choose from a range of delivery options from full-online learning with no materials provided to all materials and correspondence provided in print. These options are differently supported and priced.

13. All postgraduate examinations are non-venue based with an increasing number of undergraduate examinations being non-venue based.

14. Lecturers deliver up-to-date academic support using a range of audio and video, synchronous and asynchronous options, which are available online (or sent to students) and in the case of recordings, downloadable on iPods and mobile devices; or on CD-Roms and DVDs.

15. Students have access to *all* prescribed materials and recommended materials in E-book or electronic format.

16. Unisa has an efficient and world-class student profiling and tracking system which follow all student activity and interaction with the institution and provide actionable intelligence to lecturers, F2F tutors, E-tutors and E-mentors, administrative and support staff.

17. Unisa employees and students are supported by effective, integrated and coordinated systems, procedures, policies and structures.

As I said, this is a personal reflection that I want to share with the Unisa community. It may be phrased differently. There may be elements that I left out. We may change the order. But I think, for the first time this year, I have a sense of what ODL at Unisa can be in 2015.

5   A LAST REMINDER: JOIN US FOR A CELEBRATION OF INNOVATION IN TEACHING AND LEARNING AT UNISA, 29 OCTOBER 2010

There are many examples of innovation in teaching and learning at Unisa. There are lecturers who do amazing things using a range of technologies. There are lecturers who excel at using video and satellite broadcasting in innovative and effective ways. There are lecturers who do amazing things during group discussions. There are lecturers who really break new ground in integrating community engagement and research into their teaching and learning strategies.

We would like *to start* to celebrate innovation in teaching and learning on regular intervals. This coming Friday is the first of such celebrations. The eight presentations are not the final word on innovation in teaching and learning. They are the first of many presentations to follow! I would therefore like to invite everyone 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. The tentative programme looks as follows:

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

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

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 26 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
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26 October 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.