

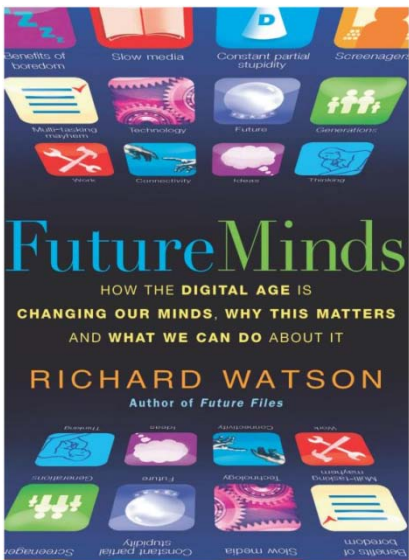


## ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 42, 8 DECEMBER 2010

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### 1 **FUTURE MINDS. HOW THE DIGITAL AGE IS CHANGING OUR MINDS, WHY THIS MATTERS AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT**



How does one prepare for the next 50 years? How should we prepare our students for the next 50 years?

Richard Watson, the author of the bestseller “Future files” (revised edition, 2010) wrote a follow up called “Future minds. How the digital age is changing our minds, why this matters and what we can do about it” (2010). As with his book “Future files”, I found his insight into the changes we are facing today (and in the future) thought-provoking.

In the “overture” to his latest book, Watson (2010:1) reflects on how technology, amongst other things, is shaping us where we may have “hundreds of online ‘friends’ yet we may not know the people next door...” and where we “forage” online looking for

just-in-time information which we forget the moment we leave Google. Our “attention and relationships are getting atomized. *We are connected globally, but our global relationships are becoming wafer thin and ephemeral.* We are in danger of developing a society that is globally connected and collaborative, but one that is also impatient, isolated, and detached from reality” (Watson 2010:3; italics added).

In response to these changes that are remodeling the way we think (and live), Watson (2010:4) suggests that we “need to do a little less and think a little more. We need to slow down – not all the time, but occasionally. We need to stop confusing movement with progress and get away from the idea that all communication and decision making have to be done instantly”. At the end of this “overture”, Watson (2010:6-7) proposes a number of general pointers which are worth considering such as...

- “While multitasking means we are getting better at thinking faster, the quality of that thinking is suffering”.
- “While screens offer us many opportunities, they can encourage thinking that is devoid of context, reflection and an awareness of the big picture”.
- “We are living faster than we are thinking... We ... need to step off the ‘speed is good’ treadmill and deal with our fear that a slower pace will somehow have a negative impact on economic growth or progress”.
- “...constant connectivity means that we are replacing intimacy with familiarity, and this can also make our physical relationships with other people more ephemeral. Hence we face a threat of digital isolation”.
- “The anonymity of the web is eroding empathy, encouraging antisocial behavior, and promoting virtual courage with real emotion”.
- “We find it harder to escape from the presence of others and to be truly alone to concentrate on our thoughts and our ideas”.

Watson (2010:11) starts his first chapter in the book with a quote by Pablo Picasso who said “Computers are useless. They can only give you answers”. He then continues to explore the age of the “screenagers” and the way they think differently from previous generations. Among the differences I found profound are... “Memory is something found on a hard drive. If they need information, then they Google it”; and “The reset generation thinks that if something goes wrong they can always press a button and start again” (Watson 2010:12). This generation is known for their predisposition to immediate gratification of their needs, whether digital or non-digital and commitments which are essentially fluid, because if you are late, you “simply reschedule” (Watson 2010:13). The “screenagers” of today also has the constant need for reassurance that they are not alone and therefore they use the Net to constantly “check on their own existence and coalesce around an ever-changing universe of friends and online culture” (Watson 2010:14).

Important for teaching and learning is the statement by Watson (2010:15) that we “are in for rather stormy weather over the next few decades as the analogue minds of both teachers and parents clash with the attitudes and behavior of digital minds”; where “the merest hint of new information, or the faintest whiff that something new is going on somewhere else, is irresistible” (Watson 2010:17). Watson (2010:20) asks “You can study, be on Facebook, watch television, and have a mobile phone clamped to your ear, *but is anything of substance going into your brain?*”(Italics added). The “foraging” nature of today’s “screenagers” result in students who “skim, skitter, and are generally pointillistic in their approach to knowledge. When you can Google information, why do you need to form or remember knowledge?” (Watson 2010:22). This results in everyone jumping around like “caffeinated rabbits, briefly chewing on a bullet point and then careering off to snack on a patch of color or perhaps a typeface change” (Watson 2010:24; I just love this statement!).

Watson (2010:24) suggests that we may need to “decelerate learning” in line with the “slow food” movement – to allow time for reflecting and the consideration of alternatives. “We do need minds that can react instantly or monitor fast-flowing information. We do need minds that can screen. In this sense, screenagers have an advantage. *But we also, crucially, need curious, playful, imaginative, deep minds that can dream up big ideas and express them crisply and succinctly to other people in a compelling manner*” (Watson 2010:27; italics added).

Watson (2010:35) continues to explore and deconstruct the notion that ICT is a “silver bullet” which can magically turn bad teachers into good ones. What I personally found lacking in Watson’s (2010) deconstruction of the impact of technology on teaching and learning, is a creative and compelling solution on how to interrogate notions of “intelligence”, “cheating” and “plagiarism” in an era of “copy-and-paste education”. While I agree with many of his statements such as that “screenagers” are incapable of “ignoring irrelevant information”, I am not sure about statements such as “hard books should therefore be compulsory and, in the spirit of lifelong learning, there should be campaigns aimed at adults encouraging them to read more and to read better books” (Watson 2010:39). Watson (2010:39) furthermore states that in “future machines will be better than people at storing and applying information. Hence, educating individuals in just-in-time knowledge retrieval *is a recipe for eventual oblivion or at least irrelevance*” (italics added). I am not sure I agree with him that this will result in the “eventual oblivion or at least irrelevance”... Watson (2010:43) seems to equate today’s world in which “screenagers” grow up as a world devoid of dreaming, emotional connections and curiosity. A more important issue is not to evaluate today’s notions of “dreaming”, “emotional connections” and “curiosity” with an era where the Andrew Sisters could sing “Don’t fence me in” or Nat King Cole sang of “When I fall in love, it will be forever” – *but to rather interrogate, non-judgmentally, the scope and nature of dreaming, emotional connections and curiosity in today’s networked world*. I am not so sure that to compare today’s type of dreaming and emotional connections with those of yesteryear is a constructive exercise. More useful would be to explore the impact of changed relations and emotions on the future of humankind and the planet.

In his chapters on “Thinking about thinking”, “The sex life of ideas”, “Thinking spaces”, and “How to clear a blocked brain”, Watson (2010), in my view, falls into the trap of generalisations and “cheap” ten-point recipes found in hundreds of other “self-help” guides. As in these guides, many of his thoughts are helpful, but less than original. For example, he suggests “If you want a big idea or a clever solution, there is simply no substitute for waiting” (2010:65); or quoting biochemist Albert Szent Gyorgyi who said “Discovery is an accident meeting a prepared mind” (2010:70). I found these generalizations mildly frustrating, at times superficial and disappointing after having thoroughly enjoyed his previous book “Future files”. This book, while it has its moments, smacks of a commercial exercise reminiscent of hundreds of other books on the “self-help” shelves of the CNA or Exclusive Books...

Yet, Watson (2010) makes a number of statements that Unisa may do well to consider seriously..., such as...

- “...large groups are poorer for creating an entirely new idea” (Watson 2010:83). Think of the number of workshops and strategic planning workshops where large groups of Unisa staff are wined and dined and expected to come up with strategic plans... Watson (2010:83) suggests that if you are really looking for originality or creativity a “single talented individual (or a small group of talented thinkers with diverse experience) is a better route than a larger group”. *I rest my case.*
- Watson (2010:105) quotes Albert Einstein who said “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts”. Think of performance contracts, performance appraisals, operational plans, etc. *I suspect that Unisa has fallen into the trap that if we can count something, it must be worth counting...*
- “Open plan [offices] works on *some* levels, but people should either be given the choice of public versus private or they should be allowed to escape the communal when specific tasks demand it” (Watson 2010:108; italics added).
- “Organisations worry too much about what people are doing. *If employees look busy it is assumed that they are being productive and vice versa*” (Watson 2010:124; italics added).

Though Watson’s (2010) latest book, “Future minds” is not necessarily the most thrilling or most thought-provoking book I have read (and shared) this year, it does offer us the opportunity for reflection on a number of issues regarding teaching and learning at Unisa, such as...

- How do we prepare our learners for an age where “memory” will be something you find on a computer’s hard drive?
- What type of lecturers is needed to prepare students for a digital age?
- Unisa is slowly but surely moving to an online teaching and learning environment. How can we prevent thinking “that because it is online, it must be better”?
- How do we design online learning experiences which do not perpetuate the “atomisation of attention” and “wafer thin and ephemeral relationships” (Watson 2010:3)?
- How many of our students and lecturers are “screenagers”? How many of us feel lost if we forget our mobiles at home? How many of us check our e-mails at home? How many of us (students and lecturers) are addicted to being perpetually connected and in touch?
- How can we prevent our performance contracts and performance appraisals from measuring (and rewarding) perpetual busyness and “countables”?
- How do we describe notions of “intelligence”, “relationships”, “originality” and “care” in a digital age without comparing our descriptions with a pre-Google era?

The above questions are anything but a conclusive or exhaustive list of issues to consider as we prepare for 2011 and the years to come. There is however a lot we must still discover and interrogate, reminding ourselves of the words by Albert Szent Gyorgyi who said that discovery “is an accident meeting a prepared mind” (in Watson 2010:70).

## **2 SOME YOU WIN, SOME YOU LOSE. A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON THE ODL PROJECT IN 2010**

As this is the last ODL Communiqué for 2010, I would like to share with you a reflection on the past year.

When I was asked about a year ago whether I would be willing to be seconded into the position of being the ODL coordinator for 2010, the choice was one of the most difficult choices I have ever made in my life. I still do not know why I said “yes”, as my whole being cried to decline the offer as graciously as possible. Since 2007 I had been involved, in one way or another, with the first ODL initiatives *but always on the sidelines*. I saw the various initiatives and I saw some of them fail. I was witness to the trauma of many of Unisa’s staff who bought into the various processes, just to be let down by the lack of institutional support, the lack of clout of the teams and a range of other reasons. I was furthermore witness to the impact “driving” the ODL project had on many of my colleagues. What scared me most was the fact that I did not know more about ODL than my predecessors, on the contrary. I was in many respects less experienced and ill-prepared for, (and very scared of) the different institutional agendas, claims and counter-claims. I was also immensely scared of failing. I spoke to a number of colleagues at Unisa, looking for wisdom and guidance – but the final decision was mine to make. And I accepted.

Looking back on this year I am immensely humbled with many of the achievements of the different ODL task teams. All of the teams were led by very competent and very senior staff that all had to balance their day-to-day tasks with the additional responsibilities of leading teams into mostly unknown territories. It would have been impossible to achieve what we did without their commitment and passion. I would further like to thank all the members of the different ODL task teams for their energy and engagement. There are still a number of outstanding issues that we will have to grapple with in 2011. I confess that I don’t have any ready-made answers to these issues. But I hope to contribute and create spaces for critical interrogation of our (and my own) assumptions and beliefs of what Unisa as a comprehensive ODL institution can look like in 10 years time. I wish you all a well-deserved break and a wonderful and rewarding 2011.

## **3 DEAR FATHER CHRISTMAS...**

During this time of the year, children in many families across the world will be writing to Father Christmas with requests on what to bring them for Christmas. I can personally vouch that it used to work when I was small! I just thought I may take a chance and send Father Christmas a few requests on what to bring Unisa for Christmas. My letter follows...

Dear Father Christmas (when I was small you were male, but just in case you had been a Mother Christmas all along, please forgive my ignorance?)

May you please bring Unisa...?

- **Appreciation** of the impact of the unique contexts of many of our students who come to Unisa as last resort in (the often futile) hope of carving out a future for them and their families dependent on their success. May we never underestimate or disregard their hope and dreams.
- **Gratitude** for the tireless effort and dedication of the majority of Unisa's staff who really want to serve our students in sometimes very difficult, tiring and often unsupportive circumstances.
- **Courage** to face up to the fact that some of the service we offer to students absolutely horrible. Please give us the will to DO something about it and not spin doctor our way out of the situation?
- **Creative and innovative thinking** to address problems that keep haunting us.
- **Respect** for one another regardless of race, culture, gender, or whatever other norm becomes en vogue in a moment's notice depending on the issue (or position) at stake.
- **The humility** to acknowledge that our understanding of what the future may hold for Unisa is mostly very partial and most probably wrong.
- **The audacity** to keep hoping that our individual and collective dreams and efforts *do* make a difference to students' futures.

Please deliver these at any open door at Unisa despite there not being a worthy recipient or an empty stocking.

Yours faithfully

Paul

*P.S. Just in case you find some extra space in your bag, won't you PLEASE bring Unisa a system to prevent us from having to sign in our laptops day after day at every entrance of every building on the campus every time we enter and leave? And if there is some more space, if (at least...) the restaurants on the campuses could be Wi-Fi hotspots it would be SO great!*

#### 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 7 December 2010). The repository is updated on a regular basis and if you register on the repository, you will get notifications of any new uploads.

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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.