



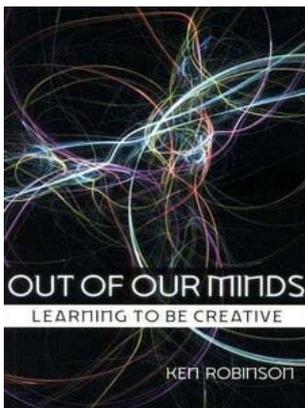
ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 45, 26 JANUARY 2011

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1 **OUT OF OUR MINDS...**

The history of thought and culture is a changing pattern of great liberating ideas which inevitably turned into suffocating strait-jacket, and so stimulate their own destruction by new emancipating, and at the same time, enslaving conceptions. The first step to understanding people is the bringing of consciousness of the model or models that dominate and penetrate their thought and action. Like all attempts to make people aware of the categories in which they think it is a difficult and sometimes painful activity, likely to produce disquieting results. The second task is to analyse the model itself, and this commits the analyst to accepting or modifying or rejecting it, and in the last case, to providing a more adequate one in its stead (Isaiah Berlin quoted by Robbins 2001:167).



The quote above sets the scene for a reflection on some of our educational paradigms at Unisa, and in higher education in general...

After seeing a [video clip](#) “Changing education paradigms” by Ken Robinson on [TED](#) (Technology, Entertainment, Design) earlier this year I was intrigued by a number of his statements and decided to buy one of his books, “Out of our minds. Learning to be creative” (2001). In this book, Robinson addresses three questions namely: “Why is it essential to promote creativity?” “What is the problem?” and “What should be done?”

The rationale for Robinson’s (2001:1) concern is an “axis shift towards intellectual labor and services” and therefore an urgent need to find people who are “creative, innovative and flexible”. There is however a major problem (according to Robinson) - *there are not enough of them.*

Education is usually celebrated to be the “natural” producer of creative individuals, but it not true (if it ever was...). Robinson (2001:3) claims that education, (throughout the ages and even today) sorts students into two categories namely economic and intellectual. Children and university students are “sorted” according to their future *economic* roles and according to their *intellectual* ability and therefore creativity as an essential characteristic is not taken into account. Not one of these “sorting” mechanisms, according to Robinson (2001:3), is valid anymore, if it ever was.

Robinson (2001) spends the main part of his book on exploring the impact of “the obsessive preoccupation” with “academic ability” and our definitions thereof (2001:7). He states: “... there’s more to intelligence than academic ability and much more to education that developing it” (2001:7). A point to which we return later.

For anyone curious about the challenges facing education, Robinson’s first chapter “Bursting the banks” (2001:17-57) provides an informative overview. As in the video clip I referred to earlier, Robinson’s main claim is that today’s education and obsession with “academic ability” is a direct result of the Industrial age and that *such a preoccupation is no longer appropriate for this age of technological innovation* (2001:23). The answer is therefore not in redeveloping curricula or adding modules on values or emphasising specific skills such as “lateral thinking” or “creativity”, *but in an urgent and total rethink of our total educational paradigms*. Though I personally found some other authors (such as Martin 2006, “The meaning of the 21st century”) to provide a more critical exploration of the challenges we face in the 21st century, Robinson does make a number of remarks that are worth exploring. With regard to the “leisured society”, Robinson claims that technologies “are blurring the boundaries between home and work, business and pleasure” (2001:47). Technology has become “...invasive and pervasive. The boundaries between office and home, work and play, office and life, are dissolving into one long work shift” (2001:47). People are working longer, with shorter deadlines with a general higher standard of life, but with a lower quality” (2001:47).

Other characteristics of present-day society that Robinson refers to are the “overqualified unemployed” (2001:48) and the “falling currency” of academic qualifications (2001:49).

As a way out of these dilemmas, Robinson (2001:58) encourages us to critically engage with our “septic focus” which entails, amongst other things, our preoccupation with academic ability “based on deep-seated assumptions in Western culture”. The exclusive focus of academia on “propositional knowledge” and “logico-deductive reasoning” resulted in the “triumph of science” (2001:66-72) as *the* mantra of salvation in the 21st century. To prove his point Robinson (2001:74-93) explores the rise of education in the Western world from the Middle Ages, the so-called “grammar-school curriculum” of the 1600s, the massification of primary school education and the definition of “academic ability” that till today, has remained unquestioned.

Robinson writes: “Academic ability is not the same as intelligence. Academic ability is essentially a capacity for certain sorts of verbal and mathematical reasoning. They are very important, *but they are not the whole of human intelligence by a long way*” (2001:81; emphasis added).

Despite this incomplete and faulty picture of “intelligence”, “our education systems are completely preoccupied with these abilities to the virtual exclusion of many others that *are equally vital*” (2001:81; italics added). This “septic focus” reigns supreme and results in an unnatural division between the arts and the sciences, the division of intellect and emotions and the narrowing of intelligence (2001:82). A “septic focus” values “two abilities above all others: a particular sort of critical analysis and short-term memory. The most common form of assessment in schools and universities is still the timed written examination. Success requires a good short-term memory: the ability to retain factual information at least until the examination is over” (2001:85).

Robinson (2001:94-110) continues to explore the multifaceted nature of intelligence, the fact that intelligence is interactive and dynamic and that each one of us has a “different profile of intellectual and creative abilities”. This forms the basis for Robinson’s claim that the binary classification of students into “academic and non-academic” is false and the foundation for our “septic focus” (2001:107). The fact that there are *multiple intelligences* and that the 21st century would need a good share of all these types of intelligences provides Robinson with a basis to then explore the scope and sources of creativity (2001:111-137).

For those readers who are interested in Robinson’s three types of “originality” should read his exploration of personal, social and historic originality (2001:116-118). The creative process, according to Robinson (2001:128 et seq.) involves finding the right medium, one’s ability to control the medium and the need for freedom to experiment and to take risks. Robinson makes the first point, namely the importance of finding “your” medium. Creativity is not an abstract skill which can be applied outside of specific contexts. Someone who is excellent as an artist or mathematician may not be creative at all in other contexts (2001:129). Often when someone tries to be creative in a medium that is “not theirs”, they will be extremely frustrated and not as creative (or at all) as when they have find a medium that suits their specific profile.

Closer to the end of the book, Robinson explores the false dichotomy between intellect and feelings and the role of emotion in intelligence (2001:138-165).

In retrospect, I personally felt that Robinson’s book (2001) is not necessary a guide on “learning to be creative” as he claims in the sub-title of the book, but rather a critical questioning of the dominant educational paradigms which we uncritically maintain and perpetuate.

I would also not necessarily agree with the pronouncement of “Brilliant” by John Cleese on the cover of the book, but the book does raise a number of questions that we, in the context of Unisa may want to consider, such as...

- a) Is it not time we critically engage with the assumptions and some of the taken-for-granted beliefs at Unisa, even if it is uncomfortable (as suggested by the quote at the start of this communiqué)? To what extent have past normative assumptions about teaching and learning at Unisa become a straightjacket that keeps us from exploring innovative and holistic approaches to the diverse needs of staff and students? To what extent does the “assembly-line” mentality of the industrial era influence and shape our teaching and learning approaches, our “performance contracts”, our detailed and minute quality criteria and our detailed five and ten year development plans?
- b) Maybe the more appropriate and more difficult question is to consider what would be an appropriate alternative model or models for an institution with more than 3 000 modules, close to 300 000 students with very diverse needs and abilities distributed over the globe? If we agree that “one size does not fit all”, how does one allow for the diversity yet be very pragmatic regarding what is possible?
- c) I am not so sure about Robinson’s (2001) claim that there are not enough creative people in the world. And I personally don’t think that ‘creativity’ is the missing link or the solution to all our problems. I have come to share the skepticism of Gray (in “Straw dogs”, 2002) that more or different types of knowledges (and for that matter specific skills) are not necessarily the passport to a more just, sustainable and compassionate society. Knowledge, and for that matter also creativity, can be used for the benefit of human life on earth, *or* for the enrichment of individuals or groups and the abuse of power. Anyone who proposes that there is a lack of creativity or lateral thinking in South Africa should just spend some time reading a week’s newspapers’ reports on the innovative ways public servants, politicians and people from a range of backgrounds and status use and invent to steal, corrupt and murder. Whether it is the siphoning of money from peoples’ or government departments’ bank accounts or the awarding of tenders, or the blowing up of ATMs, there are enough creative and lateral thinking people in South Africa. While every new technology may have the potential to be used in the service of humanity, there will always be individuals and groups of people who will use the same technology, skill or knowledge to further their own selfish interests. *Such is the nature of being human.*
- d) To what extent has Unisa (and higher education in general) bought lock-stock-and-barrel into an obsession with “academic ability” and a very defined and specific notion of “intellect” to the exclusion of other types of abilities and intelligences? What does “academic ability” look like in the 21st century? Do we still want (need?) to stream students into “academic” and “economic”?

- e) If we can adjust the examination scores of matriculants (and Unisa students) with the press of a button, how seriously do we take our own (even if misguided) notions of academic ability? It is very easy to increase student success with 5% or 10% (as illustrated in the latest matric scores). *It is much more difficult to increase academic ability or even better, to redefine academic ability for the 21st century.*
- f) If it is true that Technology (with a capital “T”) has become invasive and pervasive and that the “boundaries between office and home, work and play, office and life, are dissolving into one long work shift” (Robinson 2001:47), how do we support our academics and students? While we want to increase our students’ connectivity and access to Technology, and increase the “depth of use” by academics, how will we ensure that we guard against the invasiveness and pervasiveness that comes as part of the package?
- g) How do we prepare our graduates for employment where they will work longer hours than ever before, with a higher standard of living (if they can find employment) but with a lower quality of life than ever before?
- h) How does Unisa contribute to the “overqualified unemployed”? How do we care?
- i) With international concerns about the falling currency of bachelor degrees, how highly are Unisa’s degrees and graduates valued?
- j) To what extent does the way we assess foreground only short-term memory? What can we assess in a two-hour examination? What are the options?

2 PEER ASSESSMENT AT UNISA: EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES

You are cordially invited to the first ODL Forum of 2011 namely on **26 January 2011**, from **10:00-12:00** in the Senate Hall. During this event we will explore the possibilities and challenges of using peer assessment at Unisa. One of the examples of a department using peer assessment in some of its modules is the psychology department at Unisa.

The process of using peer assessment in the department of psychology piggybacks on the existing assignment system. Students submit an assignment for peer review which is then distributed to other students for review and these reviews are then submitted as a second assignment. Thus students receive two marks, a first mark obtained for the assignment originally submitted for review, and a second mark earned for reviewing the submitted work (this constitutes a second assignment).

The academic justification behind this process, according to Prof Vasi van Deventer, is as follows: “In writing the first assignment students are required to demonstrate particular cognitive abilities. The second assignment requires the demonstration of meta-cognitive abilities”.

According to Prof van Deventer, these two elements are critical to ensure a successful peer assessment process. The first is properly defined assessment criteria that allow students to conduct peer assessments in a valid and reliable manner. The development of these criteria and associated rating scales requires expert input and experience. The second critical element is an infrastructure that allows for smooth and efficient implementation of the system. The existing assignment submission infrastructure is useful but requires manual input in the implementation of the system. Full automation of the system would require further development of the myUnisa assignment submission system including the ability to generate feedback reports automatically, and individualised for each student.

The programme will be as follows:

10:00	Welcome and overview of programme: Dr Paul Prinsloo, ODL Coordinator
10:10	Peer assessment: a short overview: Ms Maria Madiope (Education Consultant, DCLD)
10:20	Prof Vasi van Deventer: Peer assessment in the context of the teaching of psychology
10:45	Panel discussion: Dr Gugu Moche (School of Science) Mr Chris Opperman (Assignment Administration) Ms Maria Madiope (DCLD) Mr Johann Moller (ICT)
11:05	Open discussion from the floor
11:30	Where do you see peer assessment at Unisa in 2015 and what support/systems will we need to realise this dream? Dr Gugu Moche (School of Science) Mr Chris Opperman (Assignment Administration) Ms Maria Madiope (DCLD) Mr Johann Moller (ICT)
11:55	Vote of thanks and closure: Dr Paul Prinsloo

See you there!

3 MUMBO-JUMBO 2: “DOES A GOOD RESEARCHER MAKE A GOOD LECTURER?”

In last week’s communiqué, we started to explore some of the “urban legends” in the context of Unisa, or in following When (2004), some of the “mumbo-jumbo” that has conquered Unisa, seemingly unchallenged. This week I interrogate the question: Does an increase in the research outputs of our lecturers necessarily increase the quality and effectiveness of these lecturers’ teaching?

The answer is highly contested and controversial, not only in the context of Unisa but also in international higher education. If you are interested in exploring the literature, a very useful place to start is the overview provided by Mick Healy (2010) “[Linking research and teaching: A selected bibliography](#)”. It is however in the rather lengthy article by Marsh and Hattie (2002), “[The relation between research productivity and teaching effectiveness: complementary, antagonistic, or independent constructs?](#)” that I found a very good exposition of the different elements of the arguments for *and* against the notion of a direct correlation between research and the quality of teaching. Marsh and Hattie (2002:603) introduce the topic by stating that senior academics often contend that research and teaching are “mutually reinforcing” and that there exists a “symbiotic relationship” between teaching and the quality and effectiveness of teaching. This is in line with many higher education policies and mandates (including current regimes of “truth”) at Unisa, which attempts to enforce an increase of research outputs based on the claim that research productivity is directly correlated with teaching quality. There is however, as Marsh and Hattie (2002:603) state *no clear evidence that this is indeed the case*.

In general, there are three positions regarding the nexus between research and teaching namely that research is complimentary, conflicting or unrelated to the quality of teaching (Marsh & Hattie 2002:604).

Those who support and claim a *complimentary* relationship between research and the quality of teaching, claim that “active researchers are more likely to be on the cutting edge of their discipline and aware of international perspectives in their field” (Marsh & Hattie 2002:604). Supporters of this claim also propose that students appreciate teachers who “present research that the teachers have actually conducted” (Marsh & Hattie 2002:604).

There are however also supporters of the notion that research and the quality of teaching are actually *contradictory* or *antagonistic*. The argument is presented that researchers often neglect their teaching responsibilities “in order to pursue research and publications” (Marsh & Hattie 2002:605).

And because research is mostly more publicly and financially rewarded than good teaching, this results in researchers spending their time where there is the most acknowledgement of effort and expertise. There is also the claim that researchers are mostly highly specialised while teachers must be generalists in their field (Marsh & Hattie 2002:605).

And finally there is the claim that research and the quality of teaching are *unrelated* because the two activities require “different preparation, are different tasks, involve different personality characteristics, and are funded separately by governments” resulting in a “zero” relationship (Marsh & Hattie 2002:605). These authors found no support at all “for the complementary nature of teaching and research” while they found some support for an antagonistic relation “to time spent on the two activities” (Marsh & Hattie 2002:623). It is then that Marsh and Hattie (2002:606) drop the bomb by stating: “...we concluded that the common belief that research and teaching are inextricably entwined is *an enduring myth*. At best, research and teaching are very loosely coupled” (emphasis added).

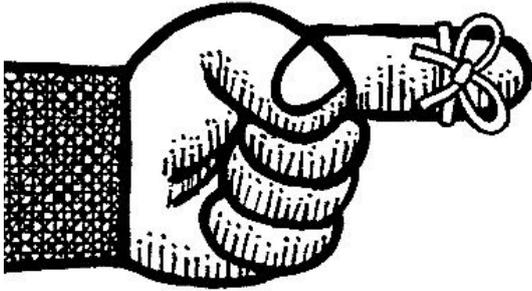
While Marsh and Hattie’s (2002) research found a *zero* correlation between research and the quality of teaching, they did find that many academics “believe in this nexus” (Marsh & Hattie 2002:630). Their findings is “consistent with the observation that some academics are gifted teachers and researchers, but that others are substantially better at one than the other, and some are weak as both teachers and researchers” (Marsh & Hattie 2002:631). Marsh and Hattie (2002:632) furthermore seriously doubt whether any research will find “the Holy Grail of a high and positive relation” between research and the quality of teaching.

But before you gleefully tear up your performance agreements..., Marsh and Hattie (2002:632) do make the point that it is worthwhile to explore “how we should enhance this relation (of course, assuming that we wish to do so)”. And they do indeed wish to do so, based on the observation that it is difficult “to imagine today’s university teachers not being aware of recent research” although they do not necessarily have to produce such research... Marsh and Hattie (2002:634) then propose some very helpful (in my humble opinion) ways on ways institutions could “re-weight research and teaching *within* institutions and departments”.

These authors propose that ways should be found to increase the relationship between research and teaching such as rewarding “creativity, commitment, investigativeness, and critical analysis in both teaching and research and particularly value these attributes when they occur in both teaching and research” (Marsh & Hattie 2002:634).

While many academics may know how to be productive researchers (a claim made by Marsh & Hattie 2002:634), and receive institutional encouragement to be productive researchers, “most academics receive little or no training in how to be effective teachers and are rarely exposed to role models who demonstrate effective teaching” (Marsh & Hattie 2002:634).

Marsh and Hattie (2002:635) conclude by stating that if “universities want to improve teaching and research, then they need to select, retain, promote, and support academics who are good at both teaching and research”. In next week’s communiqué I will continue to explore the nexus between research outputs and the quality of teaching by referring to an article by Prosser, Martin, Trigwell, Ramsden and Middleton (2008), “[University academic’s experience of research and its relationship to their experience of teaching](#)” (*Instructional Science*, 36:3-16). Watch this space...



4 ODL LAUNCH 2011

*Please take note that the ODL launch for 2011 will take place on **2 February 2011** and not **3 February** as previously communicated?*

You are all cordially invited to the launch of the ODL project for 2011 in the Senate Hall on **2 February 2011** from **10:00-13:00**. The event will include a light lunch.

The launch will provide an opportunity to reflect on the ODL project over the last 4 years and celebrate what we have achieved. We will also provide a brief overview of the projects envisaged for 2011 and also try to share some of the emerging trends that may require us to think innovatively and caringly.

Due to the fact that we would like to close the event with a light lunch, we would really appreciate it if you could send an e-mail of your intention to attend to Ms Tshoanelo Mokoena at mokoets@unisa.ac.za or phone her at 012-429 6173.

5 A POINT TO PONDER ON...

They are born, then put in a box; they go home to live in a box; they study by ticking boxes; they go to what is called “work” in a box, where they sit in their cubicle box; they drive to the grocery store in a box to buy food in a box; they go to the gym in a box to sit in a box; they talk about thinking “outside the box”; and when they die they are put in a box. All boxes, Euclidian, geometrically smooth boxes.

(Nicholas Taleb, “The bed of Procrustes”, 2010:31)

6 ODL 2011 – A SYSTEMATIC EXPLORATION

In the next few ODL Communiqués I will attempt to systematically share the unfolding of the ODL implementation plan for this year – the challenges, the opportunities and the “we don’t know yet”...

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

Drafted by Dr Paul Prinsloo

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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.