ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 47, 9 FEBRUARY 2011

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1   ODL Podcast 2: State of teaching and learning @ Unisa

It is one thing to talk about embracing the affordances of technology at Unisa, and it is another thing to cross the divide and actually *use* technologies… Listen to the second ODL podcast by clicking on the button (on the left). You should choose your audio player (whether e.g. Windows Media Player or iTunes). Clicking on the button will take you to the podcast server where you then have to click on "**ODL Podcast 2: State of teaching and learning at Unisa**". The podcast's duration is 3:13 minutes. The first ODL podcast (ODL Podcast 1) on the list is a reflection on making these podcasts –see the end of this communiqué.

2   NEWS FLASH: Feedback from the STLSC of 31 January 2011

The first Senate Tuition and Learner Support Committee (STLSC) of 2011 did not disappoint. Not only did it continue the momentum of the different ODL task teams of 2010, but I suspect it also signified a tipping point for teaching and learning at Unisa.

While I recognise that not all tipping points are necessarily good or pleasant, my feeling is that the recommendations that were approved at the meeting constitute a watershed moment for teaching and learning at Unisa. I specifically refer to the decisions regarding E-learning and semesterisation.

The decisions regarding E-learning was based on a report after a visit to the University of Leicester during 2010 by Prof Peter Havenga (Academic Planner), Mr Jason Ming Sun (Portal and Academic System Design), Ms Mpine Makoe (Institute for Open and Distance Learning, IODL), Dr Leonie Steyn (Directorate for Curriculum and Learning Development, DCLD) and Dr Paul Prinsloo (ODL Coordinator). The report first served at the STLSC of November 2010 and the recommendations were then referred to Prof Dzvimbo (College of Human Sciences), Prof Havenga and Dr Prinsloo for re-formulation. The following reformulated recommendations served at the STLSC of 31 January and were approved:

RECOMMENDATION 1: Unisa commits itself to optimise the affordances of technology in enabling blended modes of teaching and learning. As from 2012, all *new* course materials and revisions of course materials will be designed for e-learning providing for a variety of blended delivery options. This is a major shift from current practice in which some print based materials are then changed to suit electronic learning platforms. *For implementation from March 2012.*

RECOMMENDATION 2: The ODL coordinator to develop, in consultation with the DCLD, ICT, IODL, ICT, DSPQA and academic departments a strategy to support and implement recommendation 1. *The ODL coordinator to submit a draft strategy at the STLSC of March 2011.*

RECOMMENDATION 3: Organisational Development (OD) investigates the function, operations and structure of DCLD to re-align it to a strategic shift in technology-enabled teaching and learning. In the investigation the role of other stakeholders such as newly envisaged "Academy", ICT, IODL and Photography, Sound and Video should be considered. In all instances efforts should made to ensure that the process is driven by the academic demands and not by technology or the needs of support units. *A progress report should serve at the STLSC of June 2011.*

RECOMMENDATION 4: The DCLD in collaboration with the Colleges design a process similar to the Carpe Diem process or adapt the process to Unisa's context as part of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) training and use it as basis for promoting change in learner-centred e-learning design and assessment, institutional capacity building and innovation. *The DCLD to report at the STLSC of June 2011 for implementation in March 2012.*

RECOMMENDATION 5: The possibility of entering into a partnership agreement with the University of Leicester to further collaborate with the BDRA is investigated. This collaboration should build on and optimise the reports from other various overseas visits and memoranda of agreements and understandings with other international higher education institutions in defining a context-appropriate response at Unisa. Unisa's optimisation of the affordances of technology should be continuously benchmarked against innovative technology-enabled teaching and learning at a range of international institutions. *The Executive Director: Academic Planning to provide a progress report to the STLSC of March 2011*

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It is important to note that no student will be excluded from this paradigm shift – students will still have a choice to receive their materials (and all supplementary materials) in print. But this shift heralds a strategic move to embrace the affordances of technology and *design from the start for these affordances*. This paradigm shift will be supported by an initiative to increase Unisa students' access to a range of technologies. This shift will however entail an enormous change in the way we think about the use of technology in teaching and learning at Unisa. The following diagram illustrates the main elements of the shift:
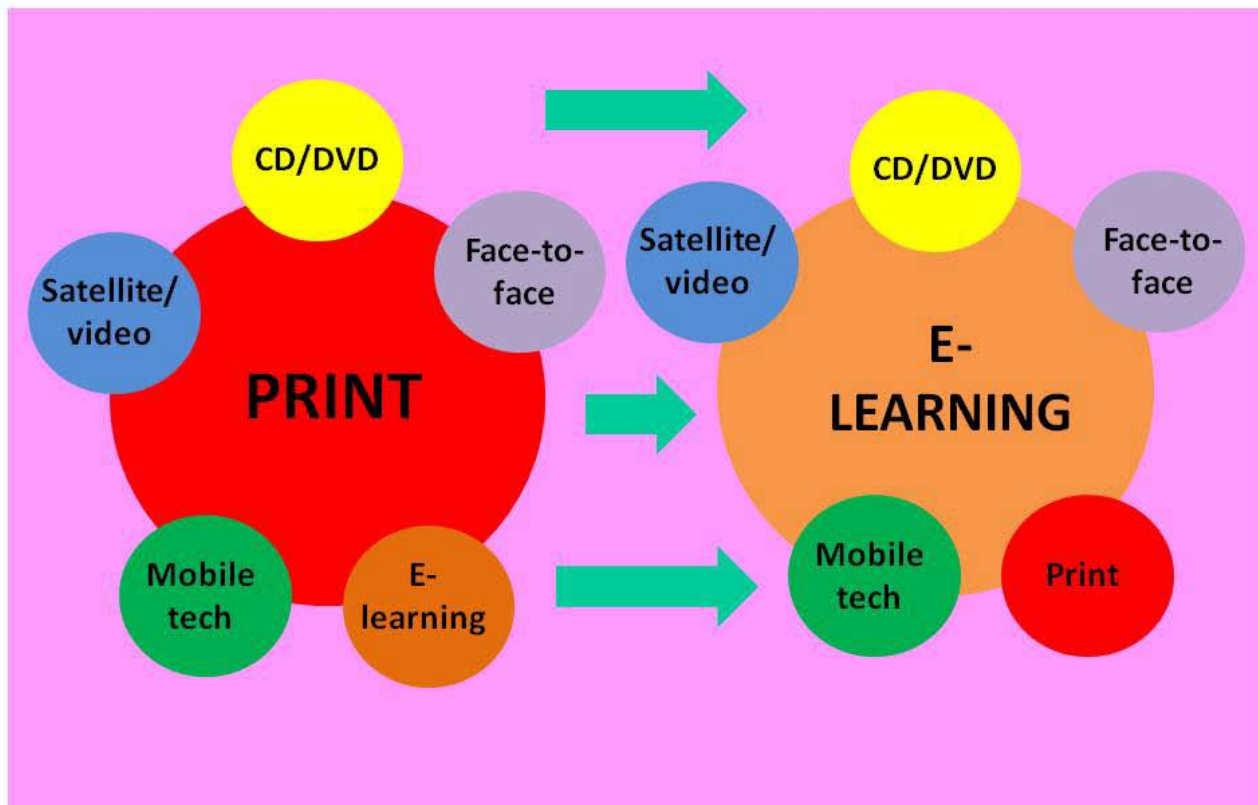
The second major report to serve at the STLSC of 31 January 2011 was the report on semesterisation. The issue no longer is whether semesterisation works or not; *but rather how to ensure that it works.* The report with its recommendations was accepted by the STLSC and will now be tabled at the Senate meeting of 10 March 2011. The recommendations are as follows:

Recommendation 1: All the colleges do a sample audit of modules which are offered in the semester system to determine the extent to which the modules meet the 12 credit requirement. The outcome of the audit must be reported to the Senate Tuition and Learner Support Committee and be accompanied by a plan to ensure that the 12 credit requirement for all undergraduate modules is met.

Recommendation 2: The academic planning calendar must ensure that the best possible time allocation is made for the execution of the various activities in the semester system.

Recommendation 3: In the interim the provision of generic comments on assignments may provide students with some feedback. Generic comments do not replace individualised feedback but it will ensure that students receive some feedback.

Recommendation 4: The online submission of assignments must be encouraged provided that feedback must also be provided on-line. The project to roll out on-screen marking and to return marked assignments online must be prioritised.

Recommendation 5: The chain for the delivery of study material, from the time it is written until it is delivered to the student, must be evaluated to determine its functionality in the semester system.

Recommendation 6: Students should receive an SMS when they register indicating that all their tutorial material is available on myUnisa, with the link to the web site. In addition, students who, for whatever reason, do not receive their final tutorial letters before their exam dates should be identified, alerted through an SMS of the fact, and informed that their material is available online. The message should include a reference to the relevant address.

Recommendation 7: Alternative assessment methods have been identified as part of the ODL implementation plan but as yet very few of these assessments are used. A concerted effort must be made to make greater use of alternative assessment methods with the process commencing in postgraduate studies.

Recommendation 8: A possibility of allowing continuous registration should be investigated. Students should be allowed to register and receive materials at any time but those registering after the cut-off date of the specific semester will only be assessed in the next semester, that is, submit assignments during the next semester period and sit the examination in the next semester. Materials for the following semester are dispatched automatically towards the end of the previous semester. This can add several weeks to the study time available for a particular semester.

Recommendation 9: Staff and student satisfaction surveys must be used to provide insights into the strengths and shortcomings of the semesterisation process at Unisa.

This *News Flash* focused on two major reports that were accepted by the STLSC of 31 January namely the move towards E-learning and the report on the implementation of semesterisation. In the next ODL Communiqué I will continue to highlight different aspects of this year's ODL implementation plan. Watch this space!

3   NARRATIVES FOR TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION TO PROMOTE SELF-DEVELOPMENT

The issue of student "agency" is a central construct in the socio-critical model for understanding and predicting student success and retention at Unisa (approved by Senate June 2010). According to the model, students are not mere and passive receivers of services, but they are *agents* making choices that impact on their chances of success. Often we bemoan the fact that students take too many modules or enrol for qualifications or modules for which they are ill-prepared. This is but one example of students' "agency". While the model admits that student success requires an "optimal fit" between student and institutional agency and efficiencies; the role of agency and self-efficacy in the lives of our students should not be underestimated.

The notion of agency (whether in the lives of our students, academics or the institution as a whole) is complex and multi-layered. Student choices are often shaped by factors *outside* of their control – such as the communities and social strata into which they are born, the educational background of their parents, the employment status of their parents, and the schools they attend. Students' understanding and enactment of their agency and self-efficacy are shaped by their habitus (an encompassing term referring to the sum-total of their life-worlds) as well as everyday shifts in their macro-contexts (such as the economic downturn or political turmoil).

When we therefore speak about the fact that students should make better choices, we should remember that their choices (like ours) are often constrained and shaped by a number of elements in their life-worlds. Having said that, one of the basic aims of higher education is the notion that students' studies will empower them to make different and better choices, not only in their professional lives but also in their personal lives. Often at graduation when students look back at where their journeys started they comment on how much they have grown and developed during their engagement with their studies.
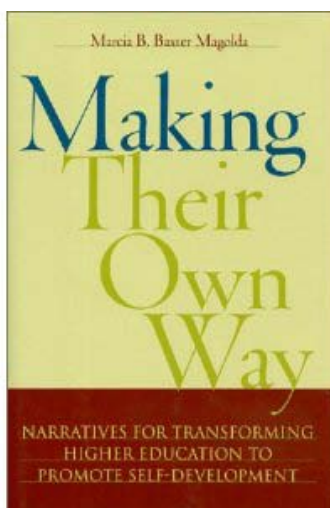
One of the classic texts that shaped Unisa's socio-critical model is the book by Marcia B. Baxter Magolda "Making their own way. Narratives for transforming higher education to promote self-development" (2004; paperback edition).

In the foreword to her book, Baxter Magolda (2004: xvi) reflects on the role academics play in the lives of students. Academics provide cognitive and pastoral maps and highlight possible pathways and point out "important stops along the way and activities to pursue at those stops that will make the journey more productive". Academics also advise students when to slow down, when to let traffic pass, and "when to use their brakes".

When students get stuck along the way, academics help them to become unstuck and continue with their journeys. All of this is "a very complex challenge" for academics and students alike. Baxter Magolda (2004) shares her research findings of a longitudinal study on 39 students over a period of 14 years (2004: 341). The initial sample comprised of 101 students (51 women and 50 men) who enrolled at the Miami University of Ohio in 1986, which has a liberal arts focus (2004:341). Baxter Magolda (2004: xvii) shares her findings of how these students' ways of knowing developed from an "absolute" way of knowing (relying on others for facts), to a transitional way of knowing (where they discovered that not all claims of knowledge are equally true), to independent knowing and then lastly a contextual way of knowing (where students evaluated the validity and use of what they know in the context in which they found themselves in). The development of these different ways of knowing was shaped by students' sense of self, their relationship with others, and their relationship with their context.

The basis of Baxter Magolda's proposal is founded on three key assumptions namely the fact that knowledge is complex and socially constructed; that the self is central to knowledge construction and that self-authorship of students become possible in environments where authority and expertise are shared (Baxter Magolda 2004:xx). These three assumptions are then translated into three principles when we try to create learning journeys which contribute to students becoming agents. The three principles are:

- We need to validate students' capacity to know
- Situating the learning experience in students' life-worlds
- Celebrating the contribution a number of stakeholders make in the construction of knowledge and meaning such as employers, communities, and students themselves.

The need to encourage and support students' self-authorship is based on Baxter-Magolda's assessment of the world our graduates are facing. Their' "careers, advanced educational and personal environments demanded that they make the transformation from external definition to self-authorship" (2004:24). Educators, on the other hand, "hope that college graduates will experience a transformation from reliance on authority to complex ways of making meaning in which they are able to integrate multiple perspectives and make informed judgments" (2004:24).

Baxter Magolda (2004:24 quotes Daloz Parks (1996) who wrote:

> The deep purpose of higher education is to steward this transformation so that students and faculty *together* continually move from naiveté through scepticism to commitment rather than becoming trapped in mere relativism and cynicism. This movement toward a mature capacity to hold firm conviction in a world which is both legitimately tentative and irreducibly interdependent is vitally important to the formation of citizens in a complex and changing world (emphasis added).

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Often after students settled into the new experience of studying, they gradually move from a trust and reliance on the absolute authority of texts (and lecturers…) to choosing their *own* ways of making meaning. Baxter Magolda (2004:38-39) calls this a "crossroad" experience. The crossroad experience heralds the start of students' taking control over their learning journeys and the way they make sense of their worlds. This experience is often the result of a moment when students encounter a situation where their rote-learning or external formulas don't work or are insufficient (2004: 93). At this moment students start to let go of the external definitions of "truth" and "what makes sense" and begin to replace these with their own inner voices (2004:94). The crossroad experience not only has an epistemological dimension where students grapple with their assumptions about "knowledge" and "truth" but also intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions. The intrapersonal dimension of self-authorship often results in and occurs concurrently with an interpersonal renegotiation of existing relationships (2004: 126-134). Once these new beliefs and relationships become sedimented, students celebrate their new identity in new intra-personally and inter-personally grounded ways. "As they mastered the processes of constructing their own beliefs, the beliefs became so ingrained that participants began to describe knowing as intuitive" (2004:171) and accepting life as it unfolds as process (2004:180). "Because participants had solidified an internal sense of self and belief, their sense of self was no longer threatened by new experience" (2004:183) or ambiguities.

In the second part of Baxter Magolda's book (2004:188 et seq.) she explores "[p]romoting self-authorship in higher education" where teaching and learning goes beyond mere knowledge acquisition to encouraging students to grow from external founded beliefs, knowledges and skills to a situation where professional and personal identities and actions become intuitive and spontaneous. In the epilogue to her book Baxter Magolda (2004:551) states that the "journey toward self-authorship is complex and arduous. … Becoming the author of one's life – in essence bringing the source of meaning making inside the self – is a life changing transformation".

Reading and working through Baxter Magolda's exploration of how to encourage and support self-authorship in higher education, I thought about the following:

1. How would our curricula look (in our programmes and in individual modules) if we followed the broad outline of growing students through a process where they accept everything we (and others) tell them (external definition), to transitional knowing and being, to becoming the author of their own lives to finally, become grounded intra- and interpersonally in their new ways of thinking and acting?
2. How many of our curricula aim *only* at the "acquisition of knowledge and skills"?
3. How many of our graduates are ill-prepared for the crossroad experiences that await them when they leave our care? What happens when what we taught them becomes outdated or no longer applies? What happens when the multiple choice answers and rote learning we drilled into them show very little resemblance to the complexities of life outside of the academe?

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4. How many of our lecturers have found their own voices in the academe or are we just repeating what others are saying?

Except for her thorough exploration of the notion of self-authorship, Baxter-Magolda's book (2004) provides a wonderful example of a longitudinal study spanning 14 years!

4   MUMBO JUMBO 4: DOES USING TECHNOLOGY MAKE ME A GOOD LECTURER?

In the previous communiqués we started to explore some of the general assumptions and often unquestioned beliefs regarding teaching and learning at Unisa. In the previous two communiqués we explored the nexus between research outputs and the quality of teaching and learning. Published research indicates that the relationship between research outputs and the quality of teaching is very unclear, hyped-up and the claim of a positive correlation between the number of research outputs and the quality of teaching is *not based on empirical evidence.*

There is however evidence to suggest that disciplinary research increases the depth of knowledge of a specific domain and testifies to the currency of the researcher's knowledge of a specific field. But this does not necessarily and/or automatically translate into better teaching….

This week we explore the question whether lecturers who make use of institutional virtual learning environments are "better" than their counterparts who do not use these platforms. Are lecturers who use *my*Unisa, who has a site on Facebook and who use Twitter (to mention but a few examples) "better" teachers than those who don't?

There are many articles that warn against an overreliance on the affordances of technology. *Using technology does not necessarily making bad teaching better*… on the contrary. This pervasive use of technology may actually result in bad teaching spreading quicker! There is often an arrogance in academics that are very active on *my*Unisa that somehow the mere fact that they are active on *my*Unisa or use Twitter, somehow prove that they are "equally good" teachers than those who do research…

Just as the number of research outputs is not directly correlated to good teaching, so is an academic's passion and activity not necessarily directly correlated to quality teaching. It *may* happen that academics who embrace the affordances of technology do show a particular commitment and care – but it does not necessarily mean that the quality of their teaching is "better" than those academics that have a limited presence on *my*Unisa.

Having said that, I want to add that the effective and appropriate use of technologies is increasingly becoming a differentiating and critical factor in determining the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning. We can no longer afford to allow students to graduate if they are not computer literate. We can no longer afford to produce graduates who are not ready for a world in which the flows and qualities of information and data are fast, contested and fluid. If it is possible to graduate from Unisa without ever having engaged in online discussions, or evaluation of online information and data, we are indeed in deep trouble.

Therefore, although we cannot (yet) categorically state that lecturers who make use of the affordances of technology are "better" lecturers than those who don't, I suspect that using technologies effectively and appropriately *will be a prerequisite for teaching in higher education at Unisa from 2013 onwards, if not already.*

The question is: Will we be ready?

5   IMPORTANT UPCOMING ODL EVENTS

Monday 1 March 2011 (Dr Miriam Makeba Concert Hall, 11:00-13:00):
ODL Forum: The Framework for a Team Approach in Curriculum and Learning Development. At this event we will engage with the approved Framework and investigate the implications for its implementation. Don't miss this opportunity!

Monday 7 March 2011 (Senate Hall, 10:00-12:00): *ODL Forum - Using portfolios as alternative assessment practice.* During this event we will explore current practices and interrogate the challenges and opportunities of using portfolios as formative and summative assessment opportunity.

Tuesday 8 March 2011(Senate Hall, 11:00-13:00): *ODL Forum – Social technologies: Noah's ark or Pandora's Box?* As more and more lecturers are using various social media platforms (eg Facebook, Ning, Twitter, etc) there is huge potential to either increase the quality of teaching or potential for a disaster… Join us for a critical exploration of the issue.

Thursday 17 March 2011 (Senate Hall, 09:00-13:00): The "Second celebration of innovation in teaching and learning". We would like to celebrate examples of innovation in teaching and learning (including student support, administration, etc) at Unisa. Please feel free to send me (prinsp@unisa.ac.za) the names of possible participants?

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6 A REFLECTIVE AUDIO CLIP ON MAKING USE OF PODCASTS IN THIS COMMUNIQUÉ: ODL PODCAST 1

As promised, in this podcast (click the button on the left) I share with you the "first" ODL podcast that I made last week with the help of my colleague in the DCLD, Ms Marinkie Madiope. When you click on the button, it will take you to a place on the ODL podcast server where you must then click on "**ODL podcast 1**". The duration of the podcast is 2:28 minutes.

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.

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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.