



## ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 56, 13 APRIL 2011

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### 1 ACKNOWLEDGING THE UNACKNOWLEDGED

I do not always acknowledge the fact that many of the issues raised in the ODL Communiqués or the references to interesting articles, are the result of fleeting conversations in corridors, colleagues who send me e-mails, or articles or references I stumble upon by chance.

In one sense the ODL communiqués have become a collective “room with a view” – not only on ODL but on the challenges and opportunities we face at Unisa – whether as academic or professional staff.

I would like to thank everyone who send me links and articles, confront me in lifts, meetings or in Unisa’s corridors. It is in these moments that I realise the ODL project is much bigger than the efforts, dreams or nightmares of one person, section at Unisa, or stakeholder group. And for this I am indebted to all of you.

In last week’s communiqué I included a piece on “Kakonomics” – Prof Petrus Potgieter (Decision Sciences) sent me the link. Also in last week’s communiqué I referred to an article regarding Wikipedia which is now available in all 11 South African languages – the article was sent to me by Ms Heidi Celliers (African Languages).

I do not always acknowledge that I am extremely privileged to be involved in the ODL project. I do not always acknowledge that who I am today and what the ODL project has achieved so far, are shaped and will be shaped by amazing women and men who passionately believe in what we cannot see but only hope for.

## 2 STEPPING INTO THE UNKNOWN

On a personal level, we all know the moment of making a decision not based on available evidence, but taking a considered chance because there is no evidence to guide us! And even when there is evidence that you can expect things to work out as you expect, there is always the possibility that life may surprise you, often with great costs. And yet, this does not prevent us from stepping into the unknown and embracing change, however difficult or scary.

In planning (and dreaming) what ODL could be like in ten years' time; what teaching would be like in the future; what technologies we will have access to; what employers will look for; often requires stepping into the unknown, taking considered chances, acting while not having anything more than intuition and hope to guide us.

It is so much easier to hold on to the past and our comfort zones (whether on a personal or organisational level), than being confronted with the uncertainties of the unknown. And yet, looking back on those moments when humans took the first step into the unknown, these moments bear witness to remarkable events that changed our lives, the lives of the people around us and the lives of our organisations.

When we step into the unknown, whether as individuals or as Unisa, bear the fingerprints of 'maybe'.

'Maybe' comes with no guarantees, only a chance. But 'maybe' has always been the best odds the world has offered to those who set out to alter its course – to find a new land across the sea, to end slavery, to enable women to vote, to walk on the moon, to bring down the Berlin Wall.

'Maybe' is not a cautious word. It is a defiant claim of possibility in the face of a status quo we are unwilling to accept...

(Young in the Foreword to Westley, F., Zimmerman, B. & Patton, M.Q. 2006. *Getting to maybe: how the world is changed*. Canada: Random House).

In many respects the ODL project is (and should be) a "defiant claim of possibility in the face of a status quo we are unwilling to accept".

Though the ancient maps bore warnings of 'there be dragons here' and had pictures of ships tumbling over the 'edges of the earth'; it did not prevent men and women from taking those first steps.

Where and who we are today, is the result of those men and women who stepped into the unknown. The future Unisa will be shaped by staff members who act often with only 'maybe' guiding them.

### 3 IMPROVING FEEDBACK WITH AUDIO AND VIDEO

*[Received in an e-mail from Francette Myburgh (ICT)]*

Original source: <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-with-technology-articles/improve-feedback-with-audio-and-video-commentary/>

By: John Orlando, PhD in Teaching with Technology

While online discussion is generally deeper and more active than face-to-face discussion, even online discussions can eventually become a drudgery. Nobody likes reading long blocks of text online, yet discussion in an online classroom is text based.

One way to break the monotony is through audio or video-based discussion. The sound of a voice adds interest that is not possible in text discussion. Phil Ice (article referenced below) demonstrated the power of voice when he compared voice feedback on assignments to text feedback. He found a number of advantages to voice feedback:

- **Improved Ability to Understand Nuance:** Students indicated that they were better able to understand the instructor's intent. Students also indicated that instructor encouragement and emphasis were clearer.
- **Increased Involvement:** Students felt less isolated in the online environment and were more motivated to participate when hearing their instructor's voice.
- **Increased Content Retention:** Students reported that they retained audio feedback better than text feedback. Interestingly, they also reported that they retained the course content to which the feedback was related better than with text feedback. These self-reported findings were supported by the fact that students incorporated into their final projects three times as much audio feedback as text feedback.
- **Increased Instructor Caring:** Students interpreted the instructor as caring about them and their work more when they received audio feedback over text feedback. This difference was due to audio feedback coming across as more personal than text feedback.

[...] One particularly good place to use video in the online classroom is during the instructor's wrap-up at the end of each week. I use weekly video posts to provide thoughts on what I believe to be the most important insights to come out of week's discussion. They are also an opportunity to give video shout-outs to students who made interesting points during the week.

Another option is to do video interviews with student on their thoughts concerning the discussion. These can be done with [WeToKu](#), a free service that allows two people with webcams to record an online video on a split screen that shows both participants at once. Students especially like being about to see and hear another student online.

There is no need to worry about production values in creating these recordings. The lighting does not have to be perfect, and there is no need to edit out the “ums” and other comments. Just make sure to avoid the common mistake of looking at the keyboard rather than the camera. Talk to the camera like you would to a friend. Your language will naturally become more expressive than with text comments, and looking away briefly, rolling eyes, and other facial expressions go a long way towards adding interest. These are a lot of fun to make, and a benefit to all involved.

[Read the full article in the link provided above...]

## 4 POSTING PREVIOUS YEARS' EXAMINATION PAPERS – A LEGAL OPINION

*Received from Prof Peter Havenga (Executive Director: Academic Planner) after consultation with Unisa Legal Services.*

Some time ago the Senate Tuition and Learner Support Committee took a decision to make previous examination papers available on myUnisa. In terms of the decision all registered students would have access to old examinations papers. The question is on whether students have a legal right to access to the papers.

### **Promotion of Access to Information Act 2 of 2000**

The preamble to the Act broadly states that the Act was promulgated to give effect to the constitutional right of access to any information held by the State and any information that is held by another person and that is required for the exercise or protection of any rights. It more specifically provides that the Act applies to the record of a public body regardless of when it came into existence. The key words here are “record” and “public body”. Record means any recorded information regardless of form or medium in the possession or under the control of that public body and public body includes an institution performing a public function in terms of any legislation. The later would apply to an institution such as a university.

The Act does provide grounds for refusal of access to records but these relate to, for example, the protection of privacy of natural persons, records of SARS, protection of commercial interest of a third party, protection of confidential information, protection of the safety of individuals, and protection of police dockets. None of the grounds of refusal would in general allow an institution such as a university to refuse access to a record such as a previous examination paper. The content of the examination paper was already made available to students in the course of writing the examination. The content of the examination paper is information that is already in the public domain and can there for not be withheld.

The decision of the Senate Tuition and Learner Support Committee is therefore, apart from sound pedagogical reasons, in line with and supportive of the Promotion of Access of Information Act.

## 5 HOW MANY ASSESSMENT OPPORTUNITIES SHOULD WE PROVIDE?

One of the outcomes of the ODL project during 2010 was the report from **ODL Task Team 3: Alternative Assessments** (under leadership of Dr Gugu Moche). The team provided some well-founded research and recommendations regarding a number of alternative assessment strategies in an ODL context. This week the question was raised that it is good to promote alternative assessment practices, important question that we need to ask are: How many assessment opportunities are sound pedagogical practice? How many formative assessments should we include in our modules? How many summative assessment opportunities are sound and realistic? How many formative assessment opportunities are possible in a semester system?

Let us consider the *pedagogical* purpose of assessment first...

When students complete an assignment (whether formally marked by the institution, or automatically marked by a software programme); the first benefit is that students realise how much (or how little) they know and can do. Without such an assessment, students may be under the impression that they know more and can do more than they actually know and can do... Many students over-estimate their ability and knowledge; and assessment opportunities create a crucial opportunity for a reality-check. Without such opportunities, disaster lurks...

But assessment opportunities are also reality-checks for tutors and lecturers! Often in marking assignments tutors and lecturers realise where students miss the mark or lack in comprehension or ability. This creates the golden opportunity for tutors and lecturers to address these 'gaps'.

Therefore *without* ample assessment opportunities, students *and* lecturers may not know how much or how little learning has taken place. Assessment as "reality-check" helps us to teach more effectively and helps students to realise how little or how much they know and can do.

*Automatic admission to examinations can never be considered good teaching. And even as exception in the face of a crisis, this should be the absolute last resort.*

I realise that in some cases Unisa *just don't have a choice* but to give students automatic admission to the examination due to study materials being received late or prescribed text books becoming unavailable, or a postal strike, or a server that goes down on a closing date.... It is in moments such as these that one realises what a precarious enterprise distance education can be – when the success of the learning and teaching becomes dependent on forces *outside* the control of the institution and/or students.

Which brings me some other issues: How many of these opportunities are therefore necessary? How many of these assessment opportunities are possible in a semester? How long turnaround time do we need for assignments to be posted, marked and posted back with feedback?

More and more students are submitting their assignments on myUnisa and on their mobiles. This does open opportunities for more assessment opportunities than what is possible when only postal services are used. Interactive computer-marked assignments also create not only more opportunities, but also the immense gratification of *immediate* feedback – for students and lecturers alike.

It is so easy to blame the semester system for allowing limited assessment opportunities. But for how long will this defence remain valid as more and more students use myUnisa? What prevents academic departments from posting a number of self-assessments on myUnisa *with feedback*? What prevents academic departments from optimising computer-marked assignments? What prevents academic departments from creating databanks and investing in software and development to create computer-generated and marked assessment opportunities? What prevents academic departments to ask *tutors* to set mock examinations and memoranda and share these on myUnisa?

We can blame the system. We can continue to blame semesters. We can blame postal services. We can blame service departments. We can blame the Academic Planner.

*But what prevent us from grabbing the opportunities we already have?*

## 6 UNISA 2011 TEACHING AND LEARNING FESTIVAL – ARE YOU READY?

The tentative theme for the festival is: *A whole new world: Curriculum, pedagogy and technology in transition*. The festival will consist of two distinct parts namely a teaching and learning symposium or indaba on 1-2 September, followed by the festival or workshop part from 5-9 September 2011.

### ***Please keep these dates open?***

During **1-2 September** we will engage with cutting-edge educators who will confront and provoke us to think anew about teaching and learning at Unisa. Among these provocateurs will be George Siemens, Gilly Salmon, Ormond Simpson, and Catherine Ngugi.

The week of **5-9 September** will see a number of exciting workshops on themes and foci such as

- Pedagogical models and approaches for developing and using podcasts for your own modules and courses
- Introduction to Teaching Online (E-Moderating)
- A Researcher's Guide to the Social Web
- Exploiting Virtual Classrooms for Synchronous Online Teaching and Conferences

- Research design and methodology at post-graduate level
- Empirical evidence of students' access to and use of Web 2.0 and digital technologies
- Conceptual models and frameworks to support your teaching, student learning and institutional changes
- Introduction to Open Educational Resources (OERs)
- Integrating OERs into learning design
- A case study of innovative online technologies : the Online MA TESOL (DUCKLING project) at the University of Leicester
- Making the paradigm shift: supporting distance learners online
- Learning and assessment in distance education
- Mobile learning: opportunities and challenges
- Costing student support
- Connectivism as pedagogy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century

Don't miss these opportunities! More details regarding the exact dates of the above workshops and where you can book will be made available soon.

## 7 WAYS TO KILLS IDEAS

By David Straker - [http://creatingminds.org/articles/killing\\_ideas.htm](http://creatingminds.org/articles/killing_ideas.htm)

*[Prof Chris Swanepoel (Decision Sciences) introduced me to this author]*

There may, as Paul Simon sung, be forty ways to leave your lover, but there are even more ways to kill a new-born idea. Here are just a few. You can probably fill in the rest.

### **Ignore it**

Say nothing. Pretend that it was not said. Let it die in silence. Most people can take this hint that they have said something that is not wanted.

### **Criticize it**

Say how bad an idea it is. Show yourself to be an expert in such things and that the person offering the idea is not an expert and hence unable to offer any idea of any use.

### **Faint praise**

Damn it with faint praise. Say how very *interesting* it is. Or how it *might just* work (with the wind in right direction). And by implication how useless it is.

**Laugh at it**

Smirk, giggle, laugh, chortle. Say how funny the idea is. This will be very effective at preventing anyone else taking it seriously.

**Analyse it**

Ask searching questions about it. Of course, as a simple idea, the person offering it will not have thought it through. If you probe far and fast enough, you can tie them up in knots. Then just leave it hanging, like the lawyer who has just crucified a witness.

**Tried it**

Say how the idea has been tried before and found to be completely ineffectual. In doing so, you show how the person in question is only good at coming up with ideas that are of poor quality and are old hat.

**Compete with it**

Come up with a better idea that shows the idea to be not that good. As the new idea is yours, you can either now get the credit or drop it quietly as it has done its job.

**Change it**

Take up the idea enthusiastically and adjust it so that it is no longer recognizable. As

**Shoot the messenger**

Instead of attacking the idea, have a go at the person bringing it up. Tell them that they are no good at creating ideas. That they should not be offering such thoughts here.

This is particularly effective at putting off other people from offering ideas.

**Give it to a committee**

This is the death kiss for almost any idea. Ensure the committee is made up of people who will argue or delay and end up with nothing in particular being created.



## 8 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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12 April 2011

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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.