



ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 54, 30 MARCH 2011

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1 ODL PODCAST 6: A JESTER IN THE KING'S COURT



To listen to this podcast, click on the icon on the left. The podcast has a duration of **5.26** minutes. If for whatever reason you cannot access the podcast (or prefer reading to listening), I include the script of the podcast at the end of this communiqué.

Introduction to the podcast: I am often confronted with questions such as:

Do you know how many people read the communiqués? Do you represent admin or academics? Or worse still, do you represent the views from Unisa's management? Or: What do you hope to achieve with the communiqués?

I close the podcast by describing my role as that of the clown or jester in the medieval courts – in service of the king, but having the freedom to comment, humour and provoke.

Listen to the podcast to find out my answers to the above questions or if you prefer reading, I have posted the transcript of the podcast at the end of this communiqué.

2 THE POLITICS OF CHANGE: ADOPT, IGNORE OR GO...

It is now more than a year since my secondment as ODL Coordinator and I continue to be amazed at the processes, personalities and politics at play in organisational change processes. And if there is one thing that has become clear this past year, it is the fact that the implementation of ODL is a *major* change process. What makes the ODL process so complex, is the fact that it is embedded in a number of other transitions at Unisa – new management, new structures, new people in new positions, new roles and ... new claims and assumptions.

This week I received from a colleague an article by Thomas Diefenbach (2007) titled “The managerialistic ideology of organisational change management” (*Journal of Organisational Change Management* 20(1):126-144. Now before you are frightened by words such as “managerialistic” or “paternalistic management”, the article is really a worthwhile read.

The author explores and reflects on change management strategies in the context of an European higher education institution. Very early in the article he points out to the increasing “market-oriented” and “business-like” approaches and strategies in higher education institutions with regard to change (2007:127). He expresses his concern that change management strategies in higher education often sets out or results in the silencing of multiple voices and discourses, and result in “monophonic and monologic organisations” (2007:127). *Ouch*.

Diefenbach (2007) shares empirical research regarding change initiatives and discourses at a specific European higher education institution and his findings from 20 semi-structured interviews with academic and administrative senior managers. *Some* of his findings resonated with some of the arguments and comments I hear in coordinating the ODL project.

Diefenbach (2007:128) states that “scaring people helps” when proposing change in higher education. This often results in claims by management that “there is no alternative” (the TINA-principle) (Diefenbach 2007:129). Often change is therefore proposed and sold to the rest of a university community as that they really don’t have a choice due to the external environment being “hostile, dangerous and frightening”, the so-called “enemy outside” (2007:129). Diefenbach (2007:129) then states that it “is almost irrelevant whether ‘the enemy’ really exists” and that the TINA strategy fulfils the role of the ‘bad witch’ in children’s’ stories. This way of presenting a rationale for accepting (forcing) change is *not* about “a better and promising future, but about a bad and dangerous present” (2007:129).

Not only is such a change strategy sold on the basis of the ‘enemy outside’, but also by continuously referring to the ‘enemy within’ (2007:130). This results from the assumption that the “few who knows” should guide those who don’t, resulting in top-down, “invasionary” approaches to change (2007:130) where “the grand plan” for change is forced downwards. Change is therefore required by those on the *lower* ranks of the organisation and if you question or differ, you are considered to be part of the ‘enemy within’.

But those resisting or questioning change, are not without fault. In discussing reactions to such change strategies, Diefenbach (2007:132) points out that those resisting change often idealises a past “which probably has never been that way”. Opposition to change therefore has “no alternative” but to not openly resist change but rather “cope with it on tactical/operational level” where they find ways “to bypass it in their daily routines” (2007:132). By their passive hidden resistance, they “agree to change without making a real contribution to it” (2007:132). Diefenbach (2007:132) calls this the NIMBY-principle (“Not in my backyard”) – where employees turn their back on change initiatives and disengage from the discourse and keep on doing whatever they were doing before the change initiatives.

Often, management then start to refer to these employees as “the enemy within” and call them “short-sighted” and “self-interested”, while those who serve the change agenda, are anything but self-serving (2007:133). The gauntlet is then dropped and employees ordered to either accept change or face the consequences (2007:134).

Interestingly, Diefenbach (2007:135) points out that it “goes without saying that not all have to change: those who are in favour of managerialism, or those who successfully pretend to be for it, *do not need to change their worldviews or attitudes*” (emphasis added). Resistance to change is never “laid at the door of senior managers” (2007:135). Diefenbach (2007:135-136) then continues to explore the crux of organisational change by pointing out that organisational change is always about “influence, power and control” and that organisational change “is a socially constructed reality with negotiated meaning as outcomes of power relationships and struggles for supremacy” (2007:135).

Interestingly, though much of the resistance to change can be ascribed to people’s inherent dislike of change and longing for comfort zones and continuity; people also resist

...the cynical use and misuse of ‘grand’ ideas for personal and group interests. People are fed-up with ambitious senior managers who join organisations they do not know, go everyone on their nerves with their buzzword ideas, who are only interested in furthering their own career and market-value, mess around for a couple of years with several change management initiatives, and then leave the organisation in a state worse than before for good and with a golden handshake (2007:137).

Diefenbach (2007:137) then suggests that often managerialism is introduced to “cure” resistance to change; forgetting that managerialism is the *cause* of the resistance to change. He concludes that proponents of managerialistic approaches to change management are often surprised by the resistance they encounter forgetting that there is enough evidence to suggest that “company-wide, top-down initiated and introduced change programmes don’t work” (2007:139).

There is a lot in the article that somehow resonated with my own beliefs regarding how change is introduced and ‘managed’, but I also have a number of concerns.

One of my concerns is that Diefenbach (2007) does not provide alternatives or examples of change-from-the-bottom approaches. I am sure that there is a place for top-down change at times, most probably done in certain ways, but are all top-down initiatives managerialistic and ‘bad’? Are all bottom-up change initiatives good? What is required of a “top-down” change initiative to be effective and get sufficient buy-in, especially considering that many people inherently dislikes change and will defend the “as is” at all cost? Often change initiatives are accused of being managerialistic if I don’t agree with the changes, but if I do, the initiatives are heralded as timely and good!

Unless I am living in a fool’s (not a jester’s) paradise, much of the ODL project, although initiated from the top, were consulted, often referred more than once to colleges and departments for consultation and input. And yet, many a times the project is being accused as being part of a managerialistic assault on academic freedom and questioning the integrity, commitment and expertise of staff. Often resolutions taken after consultative processes are simply ignored - the not-in-my-back-yard (NIMBY)-principle of Diefenbach (2007). After reading Diefenbach’s article, I once again realised that organisational change is complex and that we should not underestimate the roles, assumptions and claims of different role-players in proposing or opposing change.

3 WHAT A SCOOP! THE LATEST NEWS ON THE UNISA 2011 TEACHING AND LEARNING FESTIVAL

I have just received the great news that George Siemens has indicated his availability to join us during the Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning Festival 1-9 September. *This is absolutely fantastic news.* It will be the first time George will be visiting South Africa and Unisa will be the proud host! More details to follow later. The following biographical details are published on George’s website:

George Siemens, Founder and President of Complexive Systems Inc., a research lab assisting organizations to develop integrated learning structures for global strategy execution. In 2006 he authored a book - *Knowing Knowledge* (.pdf version [available here](#))- an exploration of how the context and characteristics of knowledge have changed, and what it means to organizations today. In 2009, he published the [Handbook of Emerging Technologies for Learning](#) (.pdf version [available here](#)) with Peter Tittenberger.

George is currently affiliated with the [Technology Enhanced Knowledge Research Institute](#) (TEKRI) at [Athabasca University](#). His role as a social media strategist involves planning, researching, and implementing social networked technologies, with focus on systemic impact and institutional change.

Prior to TEKRI, he was the Associate Director, Research and Development with the [Learning Technologies Centre](#) at [University of Manitoba](#).

[Source: <http://www.elearnspace.org/about.htm>]

The tentative plans include that there will be a Teaching and Learning Symposium on Thursday 1 September till Friday 2 September 2011 with international speakers to provoke and stimulate our thinking about teaching and learning in an ODL context. Confirmed speakers so far include Prof Gilly Salmon (University of Southern Queensland, Australia) and Prof Ormond Simpson (Fellow of the Centre for Distance Education, University of London International Programmes) and now George Siemens, Athabasca University, Canada. We also envisage having an Innovation in Teaching and Learning Cocktail and Award function on Thursday evening 1 September. What a way to celebrate the arrival of Spring!

The week following the symposium (Monday 5 – Friday 9 September) we will host a number of interactive workshops and living labs regarding a number of issues in teaching and learning in an ODL context such as using mobile technologies, using Open Educational Resources (OERs), using podcasts, and so forth.

Please keep these dates open? It will be an opportunity not to be missed!

4 REPORT BACK ON ASSESSMENT OF DISCUSSION FORUM AND BLOG PARTICIPATION

I received the following report from Mr Johann Moller (ICT):

The report of ODL task team 3 suggested that alternative assessment practices are essential and a revitalisation of current assessment practices for Unisa is needed. However, the interest shown by academics and the low attendance at a recent discussion forum regarding the possibility of marking student participation using the social media type tools like Blogs, Discussion Forums and Wikis on myUnisa does not support the wide need implied by the Task team report. Is the Unisa community really willing and ready to move away from MCQs and essay type assignments?

No request for marking discussion forum participation was received. As a result, the ability to use discussion forums as an assessment method will not be developed by ICT.

The few participants at the session as well as e-mails received did express a need for marking of Blog participation. The possibility to give a score, or marking the Blog using a rubric or even exporting a completed blog with comments and submit as an assignment was mentioned. ICT will evaluate the development priority for the assessment of blogs in the next few weeks.

If there is anyone out there who would still like to give input towards this type of assessment practices please send your written motivations, case studies and suggestions by 20 April 2011 to the ODL co-ordinator at prinsp@unisa.ac.za.

Thanks for the report Johann!

5 ODL FORUMS ON THE FLORIDA CAMPUS

One of the big and persistent concerns of Unisa staff on the Florida campus is their inability to attend many of the events on the Pretoria campus. Besides being unable to attend events hosted only on the Pretoria campus, Unisa Florida staff members often also feel excluded and feel that they are not taken seriously. I requested the colleges with staff on the Florida campus for dates on which we could host specific ODL events of interest to the staff and disciplines represented on the Florida campus.

It is a great pleasure to announce that we have at least two dates where I will host ODL forums on the Florida campus.

The dates and themes are as follows:

20 June: ODL @ Unisa. A progress report – taking participants through how far we’ve come and update them on progress.

22 August: Emerging trends in ODL: what does the future of ODL @ Unisa look like?

The events will take place in the Gencor auditorium from 9:30-13:00.

Please support these events? More details of these events will be published and circulated closer to the time.

Thanks to everyone who assisted in making this possible!

6 RE THE PROVISION OF PREVIOUS YEARS' EXAMINATION PAPERS...

I am still waiting for the response and will include it as soon as I receive it.

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

ODL Coordinator, Office of the Vice-Principal: Academic & Research, Unisa, 30 March 2011
+27 (0) 12 4293683 (office), +27 (0) 823954113 (mobile), prinsp@unisa.ac.za

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.

8 TRANSCRIPT OF ODL PODCAST 6

Welcome to ODL Podcast number 6. In this podcast I want to share with you some of the issues I am confronted with regarding the role of the ODL Communiqué.

My name is Paul Prinsloo, I am the ODL coordinator.

I am often confronted with questions such as:

Do you know how many people read the communiqués? Do you represent admin or academics?

Or worse still, do you represent the views from Unisa's management? Or: What do you hope to achieve with the communiqués?

Let us start with the last question first. It is most probably the easiest one to answer!

When I was seconded as the ODL coordinator at the start of 2010, I felt a need to communicate regularly with the wider Unisa community with regard to developments of the different ODL Task teams. One of the issues of the previous versions of the ODL project was that the broader Unisa community often felt that they were left in the cold and did not know what was happening or what progress was made. Though regular ODL reports served at the different institutional forums, somehow the broader Unisa community felt excluded.

This resulted in the thought that it would be a good idea to send out regular updates regarding progress made. The communiqués were sent out via e-mail from the Executive Director: Academic Planning's office and made available on the weekly E-news.

I have no idea of how many people actually do read the communiqués. Many Unisa staff has sent me personal e-mails commenting on issues I raised in these communiqués. Some staff members posted comments on the communiqués on the Unisa ODL blog site and many others made remarks, often teasing me, when they meet me in the corridors. At several institutional meetings mention was made to the role of the communiqués in keeping everyone informed. Despite the evidence that suggests that the communiqués are read, I have no idea of how many people regularly read the communiqués – and somehow it is not important for me to know.

Why don't I care to know how many actually read the communiqués? Don't I care? Of course not, I do care – but I am also very sober to realise that many staff experience an information overload and/or may not be interested in the ODL project and/or may not necessarily relate to my style as author. By posting a weekly update on issues in ODL I fulfil my responsibility to do everything in my power to ensure that the Unisa community knows what the issues are the ODL project is facing and what progress we are making. Nothing less and nothing more.

I hope to achieve better understanding and a more critical and informed engagement with ODL – the challenges and opportunities it offers. As the communiqués developed, I also grew in “finding my own voice” and increasingly share opinions and try to provoke critical discussions. Hopefully the sharing of my own views never smacks of arrogance or self-importance. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to be allowed to communicate with the wider Unisa community. And may my reflections always bear witness to the huge respect I have for Unisa staff.

Who do I represent in these communiqués? Academics, management or administration? I represent no one else but myself and a particular responsibility to foreground ODL and the progress made with the implementation of ODL. As ODL coordinator I am reporting to the Vice-Principal: Academic and Research.

Therefore I find myself in the academic portfolio. But my substantive position is that of an education consultant in the Directorate for curriculum and learning development (DCLD) which is a professional position in the broader scheme of things.

I do not have any intention or mandate to represent management or viewpoints of management. Many communiqués contain critical questions regarding ODL which may even be seen as a critique on Unisa's management. But there are also many instances where I honestly feel that I can applaud the decisions that they took.

To close, colleagues, I somehow would like to see myself in the position of the clown or jester at a medieval carnival - in service of the king but also humouring and questioning many of the decisions of the king in an open manner.