



## ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 62, 8 JUNE 2011

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### 1 MALES DO IT, FEMALES DO IT AND UNISA DOES IT...

I thought it was just a male thing – of boasting who is the fastest, the strongest, who can drink the most, belch the loudest at a sports event, comparing girlfriends and/or spouses and so forth. Having three sisters I also know how ‘comparing’ is *also* a female thing – comparing dresses, boyfriends, recipes, pregnancies, labour pains, husbands, children, mothers-in-law, etc. But it is also standard practice among organisations – they just call it benchmarking. This is when one organisation investigates how another organisation does particular things such as marketing, strategy, assembly lines, and so forth. And Unisa is not an exception to this seemingly very human act. We often hear in the corridors of Unisa and at workshops that Unisa is compared to the Open University (OU) in the United Kingdom; or to Indira Gandhi National Open University in India (IGNOU); or to the Open University of Malaysia (OUM). There are also countless visits to many institutions to benchmark, to learn from, to explore, to compare with.

*To whom then shall we compare ourselves?* Harvard? Another ODL institution in Africa? Another ODL institution in the developing world? We should take care not to think that just because another ODL institution is also in a developing world context that this *necessarily* makes it more comparable to Unisa than a different ODL institution in a developed world context. There is no gold standard in ODL anywhere in the world with practices that can be copied and pasted regardless of context, student profiles, institutional learning trajectories, etc.

*Why should/could we compare ourselves to other institutions?* Because they have the answers we are too busy to reflect upon? Or because we think (and they may also think) that they are known for so-called best practices in ODL, or assessment, or using technology? Because we are looking for easy solutions to complex problems and we want (like good students) copy and paste the answers to our context? Let us be cautious to think that ‘they’ (whoever they may be...) have the answers to our problems, opportunities and challenges.

Let us be equally as careful to think that we cannot learn from others...

## 2 WHEN GOOD IDEAS TURN BAD...

How often have you heard someone say: “It seemed like a good idea at the time but...”?

Not only are there very few of us that cannot identify with the fact that sometimes a good idea can turn out very bad...; but we sometimes forget to award the same honesty and reflective ‘*mea culpa*’ to organisations when good ideas go wrong.

**But before I continue, let me add a disclaimer:** There is no excuse for incompetent and intentional negligence. Let me phrase it differently – there is no excuse for students not getting the service they have paid for; or staff members not getting the institutional support and/or effective processes they need in order to deliver the type of teaching and learning that they (and all of us) can be proud of.

So while the above paragraph states it clearly that I do not support incompetency and excuses for continuing dysfunctional aspects of Unisa’s teaching and learning delivery; we should also not lose sight of the reality that sometimes (more often than we would like...) good ideas turn out bad.

In the April edition of the Harvard Business Review, there is a stunning article on the issue of good ideas turning into dismal failures. The article was written by Andrew Zollie and Ann Marie Healy and is titled “[When failure looks like success](#)”. “The global effort to bring clean water to Bangladesh appeared to be a huge success—twice. But each time, the success contained the seeds of epic failure. The overarching message? Success requires ongoing vigilance. Don’t assume the mission is accomplished.”

The authors reflect on a decision by UNICEF in 1972 to provide clean drinking water to villages in rural Bangladesh by installing tube wells that pull pure underground water to the surface. For the next 20 years, more and more wells were provided and the success of the project celebrated. Soon these wells (and living close to them) became a status symbol.

In 1983 a doctor notices “black raindrops” on several patients’ skin – a sign of arsenic poisoning. This poisoning is then linked to a number of wells that were installed and inadvertently provided villagers with well water contaminated with arsenic. In the year 2000 the World Health Organisation calls this crisis “the largest mass poisoning of a population in history”.

A good idea – to provide fresh water to villages – turning into an exercise in “mass poisoning”.

In order to fix the problem, poisonous wells were identified and painted red and uncontaminated wells were painted ‘green’. Another problem ‘fixed’.

This seemed to work – except for one small problem...

Villagers living close to 'red' wells were stigmatised and families and especially young females were ostracised. In order to get rid of the problem of stigmatisation, families would paint 'red' wells 'green' during the night... The arsenic poisoning continued.

A good idea turning bad. A 'clever' solution aimed to 'fix' the problem, causing even more hardship and confusion.

The article closes with some lessons learned and I quote:

People say that success has a thousand fathers but failure is an orphan. Not in this case, however. Many factors caused the Bangladesh well intervention to become a protracted struggle. Here are two of the most important:

- *Designing "for" instead of "with"*

The organizations behind the initial intervention were international bureaucracies with an incomplete understanding of the local population, particularly of rural women. The consequences of their mistakes compounded over time. They should have embraced the community as a co-designer, not merely a recipient, of the solution.

- *A lack of "whole measurements"*

The organizations did not fully assess their projects' impacts. Because they measured success only by the number of wells built and the decline of waterborne illnesses, they missed early signs of the arsenicosis crisis. And they were slow to spot the social problems the painted wells created. They should have developed broader measures of community health and continually monitored them over time, in partnership with the communities.

Somehow this case study resonates with me thinking about some recent initiatives at Unisa. How often do we design processes and initiatives without including those *for whom* we design the processes or products? This includes implementing procedures for the appointment of tutors, the development of study materials, the sending out of recordings of satellite broadcasts and video conferencing, etc. Maybe it is time to start designing 'with' instead of designing 'for'?

The second lesson learned, according to this article, is the mistake not to fully assess the impact of our processes (on everyone involved and affected). The article states it clearly that "they measured success only by the number of wells built and the decline of waterborne illnesses; they missed early signs of the arsenicosis crisis". Does this ring a bell? How many performance appraisals are focused on counting minute details and losing sight of the bigger issues of quality teaching and learning?

I started this article with a disclaimer stating that there is no excuse for blatant organisational inefficiencies and disregard for Unisa's "Service Charter". And I don't retract this disclaimer.

But, let us not forget to learn from case studies such as the one described by the Harvard Business Review – when good ideas turn into major failures...

Lest we forget...

### 3 THE NEED FOR REAL-TIME DATA

During a team discussion to explore ways to prevent the chaos that ensued with the sending out of recordings of satellite broadcasts (SB) and videoconferencing (VC) sessions; one issue stood out more than others namely the need for real-time (correct) data and information.

If we promise students that they will receive a copy of a SB or VC session, they have a right to know where in the process are their DVDs. Lecturers have a right to know whether their tutorial letters were posted – on time. Managers have a right to know where in the different processes are study materials, the marking of assignments, and so forth.

While our student numbers and the number of interactions per day sound daunting to those of us on the inside; there are much bigger organisations in the world with much more customers and many more interactions and interdependencies than Unisa. *So why can't we get the real-time data we deserve to make effective decisions regarding our processes?*

In the movie "The Titanic" I faintly remember a young man running up the stairs after the ship hit the iceberg and the water started to flood the engine rooms, shouting "she's going to blow!" That is what I call real-time data... But it was too late. No one saw the iceberg.

We have more data than we can possibly handle. We urgently need tools and processes to make that data available to everyone at pre-determined levels of responsibility and accountability. We urgently need access to real-time (correct) data giving a true reflection of where we are in the key processes that keep this ship afloat. And if we hit an iceberg, we need to know.

Rather sooner than later.

Investigating the chaos that resulted with the distribution of SB and VC recordings, we discovered that some key stakeholders – actually the first department in the value chain, was excluded from workflow system, E-Sched. So if there were problems (and there were...) at the first point of this value chain, we would only discover it once the second role-player became suspicious.

There were also questions regarding the availability and correctness of information on the system, and who had access to the system at which part of the value chain.

At no stage could anyone in this value chain inform students where exactly their DVDs were in the process. And by the time the water hit the boilers there was no young man running up the stairs shouting – "she's going to blow". And if there was, his shouts were drowned out by the band playing "Abide with me", people re-arranging the deckchairs and the noise of a ship sinking.

## 4 THE DATA REVOLUTION IS CHANGING THE LANDSCAPE OF BUSINESS

[Original article published in The Economist, May 26<sup>th</sup> 2011]

*By Schumpeter*

In a short story called “On Exactitude in Science”, Jorge Luis Borges described an empire in which cartographers became so obsessive that they produced a map as big as the empire itself. This was so cumbersome that future generations left it to disintegrate. (“[I]n the western deserts, tattered fragments of the map are still to be found, sheltering some occasional beast or beggar.”)

As usual, the reality of the digital age is outpacing fiction. Last year people stored enough data to fill 60,000 Libraries of Congress. The world’s 4 billion mobile-phone users (12% of whom own smartphones) have turned themselves into data-streams. YouTube claims to receive 24 hours of video every minute. Manufacturers have embedded 30m sensors into their products, converting mute bits of metal into data-generating nodes in the internet of things. The number of smartphones is increasing by 20% a year and the number of sensors by 30%.

The McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) has no Borges-like qualms about the value of all these data. In a suitably fact-packed new report, “Big data: the next frontier for innovation, competition and productivity”, MGI argues that data are becoming a factor of production, like physical or human capital. Companies that can harness big data will trample data-incompetents. Data equity, to coin a phrase, will become as important as brand equity. MGI insists that this is not just idle futurology: businesses are already adapting to big data.

Companies are assembling more detailed pictures of their customers than ever before. Tesco, a British retailer, collects 1.5 billion nuggets of data every month and uses them to adjust prices and promotions. Williams-Sonoma, an American retailer, uses its knowledge of its 60m customers (which includes such details as their income and the value of their houses) to produce different iterations of its catalogue. Amazon, an online retailer, has claimed that 30% of its sales are generated by its recommendation engine (“you may also like”). The mobile revolution adds a new dimension to customer-targeting. Companies such as America’s Placecast are developing technologies that allow them to track potential consumers and send them enticing offers when they get within a few yards of a Starbucks.

[...]

### *Power to the little people*

The McKinseyites provide good answers to the first question. The data revolution is clearly handing power to the little people as well as the big ones. You can now buy a device that will store all the world's recorded music for just \$600. Shoppers can use their mobile phones to scan bar codes to see if there is a better deal elsewhere. Citizens can use publicly available information to demand better public services. [...]

But on the second question, they are silent. Big data has the same problems as small data, but bigger. Data-heads frequently allow the beauty of their mathematical models to obscure the unreliability of the numbers they feed into them. (Garbage in, garbage out.) They can also miss the big picture in their pursuit of ever more granular data. During the 2008 presidential campaign Mark Penn provided Hillary Clinton with reams of micro-data, thus helping her to craft micro-policies aimed at tiny slices of the electorate. But Mrs Clinton was trounced by a man who grasped that people wanted to feel part of something bigger. The winning slogans were vague and broad ("hope" and "change").

The sheer size of today's data banks means that companies need to be more careful than ever to treat data as a slave rather than a master. There is no substitute for sound intuition and wise judgment. But if firms can preserve a little scepticism, they can surely squeeze important insights from the ever-growing store of data. In the 1980s and 1990s retailers such as Walmart used their mastery of retailing data to launch the "big-box" revolution (huge out-of-town stores with ultra-low prices). Today's big data will provide the raw material for further revolutions.

[Read the full article [online](#)]

## 5 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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