



ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 64, 22 JUNE 2011

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1 HOW MANY...?

How many tutorial letters can students engage with (in addition to their study materials and prescribed books) in 120 notional hours? How many orientation DVDs can students watch before becoming disoriented? How many activities, blogs, and online discussion forums can students realistically be expected to take part in before these activities become too much and ineffective?

Many of these initiatives are born from a genuine desire to increase students' success and the effectiveness of our teaching. There may be some of these initiatives that are born as "after-thoughts". As such these "after-thought" activities are not well- integrated into the main design elements of the teaching and assessment strategies. This may result in disorientation, unnecessary use of resources and contributing to organisational inefficiencies and cluttering supply chains.

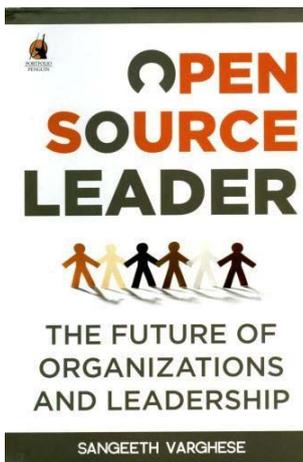
Is it not time that we seriously consider the above questions and decide on realistic and attainable guidelines for an ODL context?

What does teaching and learning in an ODL context look like? What is realistic? While there is general agreement that we should always allow for the specific needs of modules and groups of students; surely there must be a way to get agreement on the minimums and maximums?

The danger will be that we may think one size fits all. There may always be the unforeseen and unexpected resulting in a need to communicate to students. But the need for flexibility cannot (and should not) result in a proliferation of elements that could have been integrated and planned for during the design of the total learning experience.

How many is enough?

2 OPEN SOURCE LEADERSHIP



Let me start by immediately confessing that I feel cheated after buying the book “Open source leader. The future of organisations and leadership” written by Sangeeth Varghese (2010).

Why did I buy the book? Everything I read indicates that the open source movement is gaining momentum. And with a Foreword written by John P. Kotter and some glowing reviews on the back cover – I bought the book. And I regret it. I feel cheated like a student not getting his examination tutorial letter; or getting her marked assignment back after she wrote her paper...

Despite feeling cheated, there are some aspects of the book that I personally found thought-provoking.

John P Kotter in his Foreword (2011: xi-xiv) claims that there just are not enough leaders for the challenges organisations and humanity as a whole are facing. “Even if leaders are larger than life, they will never be able to see *all* the new threats and opportunities. Even if the leader could see all that is happening, there is insufficient time to tell people what to do. And even if the leader is really exceptional, when he or she retires, there is an inevitable vacuum at the top which can lead to very unpleasant outcomes” (Kotter in Varghese 2010: xii; emphasis added). The contexts in which organisations function, plan, prosper or fail are just too fluid – one leader cannot pass on and process all the relevant information that there is. We therefore need to open leadership and the secret codes that govern leadership in organisations. Thus the title of the book...

I had high hopes after reading the Foreword and finding a great quote by Noam Chomsky on the second page of the book:

A corporation is about the closest thing to a totalitarian institution that humans have ever contrived. There is a convergence of total power at the top. All the decision making lies with either the CEO or the board of directors or both, while orders are transmitted down to the lower levels, from where complete subservience is expected. The people at the top not only assert themselves, but also constantly forbid and suppress any criticism and opposition that might be directed against their agenda” (in Varghese 2010:2).

Varghese (2011:5) wonders aloud *why organisations comprising of intelligent people allow this situation to continue* (good question...). He moots two possible reasons. The first reason is the bloated assumption that the success of organisations is attributable to Brother or Sister Leader at the top. Does this ring a bell?

According to this belief the “brains [are] at the top, [and the] hands at the bottom”. Any thinking by the hands at the bottom is to be discouraged because it will undermine the “brains at the top”. The second reason is the convergence of power and money – “one who has the golden goose sets the golden rules” (Varghese 2011:6). My expectations of the book soared...

According to Varghese (2010:7) the time for a one-person-band-at-the-top has become obsolete. Not only has the amount of available information and options become unbearable for one person to handle; people in organisations will no longer submit to one person dictating strategy. The metaphor for this ‘new’ type of leadership, namely “open source leadership” is explained as follows:

In software programming, the ‘source code’ refers to the *original* version of software comprising of the unique ‘DNA’ of the programme. If one has access to the ‘source code’ of a programme you can use... and change it. In stark contrast to the practice to keep programmes’ ‘source codes’ secret, the Open Source movement reverses this logic. “It opens up their most valuable and vulnerable resource – the source code – for scrutiny as well as use, for pretty anyone who would be interested”. The logic to this approach is that when one opens up the ‘source code’, you make it possible “for a much larger and more diverse set of qualified people to examine their source code, thus providing more and better suggestions for improvements and extensions” (Varghese 2010:13).

In organisational leadership, the ‘source code’ of leadership is “the access to power, authority and influence” (Varghese 2010:14). If I therefore understand Varghese (2011) correctly, leaders often keep away from the rest of the organisation the ‘codes’ by which they decide and strategise. These codes are for the “brains on the top” and not for the “hands at the bottom”. In Open Source leadership, leaders allow access to all the information or the ‘codes’ in order for the “hands at the bottom” to know the rationales for decisions, and more importantly, to be able to propose different strategies and plans of action based on the same set of data. *Open source leadership’s authority is not in the authority the person holds, but the influence he or she has without the power* (Varghese 2010:31). Ouch. Eina. Eish.

When people have access to the ‘source codes’ of organisational leadership, they also have to accept the responsibility that comes with having access to the ‘source code’ and acting on options. Varghese (2010:34) therefore proposes that the ‘source code’ is shared with the “hands at the bottom” and then to trust that the responsibility to make choices and act in the best interest of the organisation will be respected and proven to be worthy. Once you allow staff access to the ‘source code’, then issues like minutely detailed performance agreements and panoptical office hours fall away – these don’t serve a purpose anymore.

The further I read, the less marks I made in the book (for me that is a sure sign of losing interest and disengaging). The rest of the book comprises several case studies and examples ranging from the Indian cricket team and the reasons for their success; to other examples from the Indian subcontinent that ‘proves’ the success inherent in open source leadership. While it was, on the one hand, interesting to read examples and success stories from a context other than the European Union or the contexts of the Harvards and the Stanfords; none of these case studies on the other hand really resulted in an ‘aha’ moment. As I paged through the rest of the book, my level of frustration and number of yawns grew exponentially. And by the middle of the book, Varghese’s (2010) lists of reasons, easy-to-do-Helen-Steiner-Rice-on-Tik just got too much.

Despite the frustration of feeling cheated, the metaphor of open source leadership made me think of the following:

1. I think he has a point – the complexities organisations are facing are just too much for one person (or an elite and chosen few) to make sense of. We need to share this responsibility from the “brains at the top” to the “hands at the bottom”.
2. We need to trust that the perspectives of the “hands at the bottom” are equally valid than the views from the “brains at the top” – in some cases even more valid, if we cared to listen... If the “brains at the top” see things that the rest don’t see, tell us. But also allow those at the bottom to share what they see.
3. At Unisa it may be assumed that influence is directly related to authority or the position of the person. Varghese (2010) proposes that ‘real’ influence is when there is no authority but respect.
4. How often do we hear at meetings – if we only knew *why* so-and-so decided on a particular strategy? Sometimes it would seem valid that the “brains at the top” don’t share the ‘source code’ of their decisions with those “hands at the bottom”.

There are many models of leadership – and though I was disappointed in the book, I do think Varghese (2010) is onto something...

3 FIVE BARRIERS TO AN ETHICAL ORGANISATION

In the *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) of April 2011 (pages 58-65), Bazerman and Tenbrunsel explore ‘ethical breakdowns’ in modern-day organisations. Despite the best efforts and public commitments from managers, ethical breakdowns remain widespread. Often some of those in charge are not only guilty of unethical behaviour themselves, but also encourage unethical behaviour in others. Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (HBR 2011: 59) state that when the only equation considered is a cost-benefit analysis, then the moral dimension is not part of the equation and this results in “ethical fading”.

Management often overestimates the impact of training programmes if the underlying issues supporting unethical behaviour are not sufficiently addressed. Maybe I should repeat that. *Management often overestimates the impact of training programmes if the underlying issues supporting unethical behaviour are not sufficiently addressed.* If we do not address the root causes of unethical behaviour, no training programme will make a difference. Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (HBR 2011:63) mention five main barriers to ethical behaviour in organisations namely ill-conceived goals, motivated blindness, indirect blindness, the slippery slope and overvaluing outcomes.

“Ill-conceived goals” pressurises employees to maximise outputs e.g. billable hours, or in the context of Unisa, research outputs and detailed feedback reports on the state of projects, resulting in inflating the results in an unethical manner. The second barrier to an ethical organisation is “motivated blindness” where unethical behaviour is overlooked “when it’s in our interest to remain ignorant” e.g. the use of steroids in school sport, and in the context of Unisa, possibly an increase in outputs whether revised study guides, articles submitted for publication, etc. Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (HBR 2011:63) advise that the only way to address “motivated blindness” is to root out conflicts of interest. [I suspect they underestimate the mad blindness rippling from the top to the bottom to deliver on outcomes...]

“Indirect blindness” happens when we hold others less accountable for unethical behaviour when it’s carried through third parties. Ethical conduct is then “outsourced” and we turn a blind eye when the provider commits unethical practices. Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (HBR2011:63) state that the fourth barrier is “the slippery slope” when trivial unethical behaviours are overlooked when it suits us. The last barrier to an ethical organisation, according to Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (HBR 2011:63) is “overvaluing outcomes”. This happens when we overlook unethical behaviour if the outcome is good. Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (HBR 2011:63) mention the example where “a researcher whose fraudulent clinical trial saves lives” are overlooked compared to the researcher whose fraudulent clinical trial results in deaths. Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (HBR 2011: 63) suggest that it is therefore crucial to reward “solid decision processes, not just good outcomes”.

There is enough international research indicating that ethical behaviour in organisations is a much more complex phenomenon than just the signing of a code of conduct, or completing a short course in ethical conduct. The root causes of unethical behaviour need to be addressed otherwise training programmes and incentives for more ethical behaviour may not have the necessary impact.

Thinking about unethical teaching and learning practices at Unisa in relation to the article by Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (HBR 2011), I wondered:

- To what extent is our obsession with increasing student success resulting in unethical behaviour e.g. inflating marks or marking students' examination scripts less strictly? How many lecturers feel that they cannot assess students' true abilities because then the pass rates will plummet?
- How does the emphasis on increasing research outputs contribute to plagiarism and unethical conduct by researchers because we need to get a subsidised output?
- How often does it help if you know the editor of the journal when you submit an article?
- How often can we regurgitate research findings in a bizarre chase of research outputs?
- How much of our study guides is copied from undisclosed sources?

There are many ethical pitfalls in delivering teaching and learning in an ODL context. Maybe it is time we start to explore them? Maybe it is time not to design another training programme, but rather to identify barriers to ethical behaviour in an ODL context?

4 XENOPHOBIA, THE RETURN OF THE NECKLACE AND UNISA STUDENTS

I had shivers down my spine this week, not because of the cold, but of seeing images reminiscing of the disgrace we faced two years ago when the much-hyped image of the 'Rainbow Nation' shattered when foreigners were stoned, burned, businesses destroyed and their lives disrupted. This week Zimbabweans living and working in South Africa face an uncertain future with communities hunting them down, accusing them of being criminals, or stealing South Africans' work. Again many Zimbabweans fled their homes and businesses. Some of them are our students.

This week also saw the return of killing people by necklacing them – burning them alive with crowds cheering and looking for the next victim.

In Olievenhoutbosch, where almost half of the population is Zimbabwean, Unisa has 50 odd students – many of them Zimbabwean. Will we wait till they flock police stations looking for safety before we, as Unisa, hesitantly offer blankets and help? Will we wait till they cancel their studies and flee before we offer help?

A more uneasy thought is thinking how many of our students are part of the crowds that chant and hunt down foreigners... How impotent are our curricula to change staff and students' minds and hearts to serve humanity – no matter what it takes and requires?

5 ODL FORUM IN FLORIDA

On Monday 20 May a small group of 12 interested staff met in the Gencor Auditorium on the Florida campus where we critically interrogated various issues of the implementation of ODL.

Despite the very small group, we had a very lively and informative discussion. I would like to express my appreciation to everyone who attended. Thanks also to Ms Ina Viviers for making the necessary arrangements!

6 TWO RESOLUTIONS FROM ODL TASK TEAM 6

The last and final ODL Task team report served at the Senate meeting of 15 June where both the report's recommendations were unanimously approved with acclaim. The recommendations were:

Recommendation 1: Academic Support Coordinators

- a) Within academic departments, it is recommended that the current temporary role of the Academic Department Tutor Coordinator (ADTC) be formalised in a permanent administrative function in the form of Academic Support Coordinators (ASCs) appointed according to the size of departments.
 - In the case of small departments, one ASC could suffice. In the case of larger ones, more than one would be necessary. ASCs report directly to the Chairs of Departments and sit on all School Tuition and Learner Support Committees.
 - The primary responsibilities of the ASCs would be: a) to provide administrative coordination of all student support initiatives within the department, including administering the appointment and claims of all contract employees (eg tutors, E-tutors, external markers, experiential learning); b) to refer any affective or administrative issues that come to their attention to the appropriate departments.
- b) To this end, it is recommended that the STLSC mandates an urgent investigation by Organisational Development (OD) to formalise the ASC posts and investigate the best option for the provision of the required resources. OD to report back to the STLSC of September 2011.

[A workshop will be held in August to help us planning for the implementation of this recommendation].

Recommendation 2: Student Success Forum

To provide institution-wide coordination, it is recommended that the current Throughput Forum is replaced by a Student Success Forum.

- The overall purpose of the forum is to provide a cross-functional, institution-wide operational oversight structure for the integration and coordination of all initiatives to enhance student success through the integrated student success and support frameworks.
- It is responsible for the development of detailed procedures for student support and to ensure compliance with these.
- It ensures that the dissemination of the student and institutional intelligence meets the needs of all relevant student support roleplayers to allow them to fulfil their assigned responsibilities within the student support framework.
- It also provides a working forum for in-depth engagement with reports, analyses and tracking system information and alerts and for the sharing of information and best practices across the institution. Where appropriate, follow-up actions aimed at addressing identified institutional risks will be logged and directed towards relevant support and administrative departments and monitored.
- It reports to the STLSC and Senate. The proposed composition is as follows: ED: Tuition and Facilitation of Learning (Chair); Dean of Students; Executive Dean: Unisa School for Graduate Studies; Chairpersons of School and College Tuition & Learner Support Committees; Director: DCCAD; Director: TSDL; Director: Information & Analysis; Director: Institutional Research.

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, 22 June 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.