

ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 66, 6 JULY 2011

IN THIS ISSUE:

- 1 *And then there were templates...*
- 2 *What technologies do our students have access to? Where? At what cost?*
- 3 *Too much information... How to cope with information overload*
- 4 *Synchronicity as element in teaching in ODL*
- 5 *The challenge of putting a grade on ethical learning*
- 6 *ODL repository and blog*

1 AND THEN THERE WERE TEMPLATES...

Templates, templates everywhere - proliferating like rabbits. You start with a pair and hoo-hah, the next moment you know you can start a rabbit export farm (unless your pair turned out to be a happy gay couple). In every day's dose of e-mail messages there is at least one e-mail asking for the filling in of a template. Not only do they proliferate, what was good the previous time you filled in the template, is not good enough anymore. Welcome to rabbit farm. On receiving a new template, you try to fit in your 'old' content' to the new format, just to find that your formatting changes, titles disappear and you have an irresistible urge to jump out of the window (unless you are on the ground floor).

The proliferation of the filling in of templates can be attributed (amongst other things) to the fact that more and more stakeholders need data – and more importantly, that the collected data are provided in standardised forms. We don't ask students to write an essay and tell us what they would like to register for – we provide them with a template. With more than 3 000 modules offered by Unisa, it just makes sense to harvest and present the same basic set of information in a prescribed standardised format. Prescribing a format is not taking away 'academic freedom' or stifling creativity – not in these cases, anyway. Having standard formats for certain data in a huge institution such as Unisa do make sense – at least to me. There are, however, certain provisos: (i) These templates should also allow for individual and/or module specific needs. (ii) These templates should be user-friendly – and I am not referring only to the format, but also to clear guidelines on formatting and a trouble-shooting guide if the filling of the template is really complex. [It is also good to provide the toll-free number of Life Line]. (iii) Help should furthermore be readily available – and I am not talking about browsing through a list of hundreds of frequently asked questions. (iv) Templates' main purpose is to standardise and take away the complexities of things. Templates and drop-down menus *reduce* complex phenomena to bulleted lists. And in some things, you just can't. *You shouldn't.*

2 WHAT TECHNOLOGIES DO OUR STUDENTS HAVE ACCESS TO? WHERE? AT WHAT COST?

[Received from Yuraisha Chetty, Institutional Research]

Student use of and access to technology has been an important topic at Unisa, and has been identified as an important requirement in the Institutional Operational Plan (IOP), 2011-2013. In May 2011, following discussions at STLSC, the DISA/ICT Student Technology Use Survey was conceptualised, and signifies important research collaboration between DISA and ICT.

The scope and analytic focus of the study was essentially to evaluate the current status of student access to a range of ICTs, as well as their capabilities in using such technologies. Two key research questions framed the research: *What is the extent of ICT access among UNISA students? What are the technological capabilities of UNISA students?*

To investigate these overarching questions, numerous secondary questions were explored, among others:

- *What is the range of technologies available to students?*
- *How deep is the penetration of internet-enabled devices?*
- *How are students using their devices?*
- *What are students' digital communication preferences? (e.g. SMS, e-mails or both)*
- *Why do some students prefer not to interact with Unisa via the use of technology?*
- *General technological constraints*

A quantitative methodology guided the research in the form of a survey questionnaire. The research was designed to accommodate both an online survey as well as a paper-based survey administered in the regions. The latter was intended cater for students who might not have access to ICTs, and specifically targeted regions (and rural areas within them) where myUnisa usage was considered low. This enabled us to widen our reach to a diverse group of students. The regions identified were as follows: Mthatha, Newcastle, Mafikeng, Giyane, Makhado, Durban, Polokwane, Richards Bay and the Wildcoast.

The survey went into field on 15 June, and will remain in field for a month until 15 July. To date, approximately **16 988** online questionnaires have been completed. The paper-based leg of the survey, which is being managed very efficiently by administrators in the regions, is also underway, and there have been requests for additional questionnaires for some of the regions.

We will keep you posted on progress.

3 TOO MUCH INFORMATION... HOW TO COPE WITH DATA OVERLOAD

Schumpeter, [The Economist, Jun 30th 2011: 59](#)

GOOGLE “information overload” and you are immediately overloaded with information: more than 7m hits in 0.05 seconds. Some of this information is interesting: for example, that the phrase “information overload” was popularised by Alvin Toffler in 1970. Some of it is mere noise: obscure companies promoting their services and even more obscure bloggers sounding off. The overall impression is at once overwhelming and confusing.

“Information overload” is one of the biggest irritations in modern life. There are e-mails to answer, virtual friends to pester, YouTube videos to watch and, back in the physical world, meetings to attend, papers to shuffle and spouses to appease. A survey by Reuters once found that two-thirds of managers believe that the data deluge has made their jobs less satisfying or hurt their personal relationships. One-third thinks that it has damaged their health. Another survey suggests that most managers think most of the information they receive is useless.

Commentators have coined a profusion of phrases to describe the anxiety and anomie caused by too much information: “data asphyxiation” (William van Winkle), “data smog” (David Shenk), “information fatigue syndrome” (David Lewis), “cognitive overload” (Eric Schmidt) and “time famine” (Leslie Perlow). Johann Hari, a British journalist, notes that there is a good reason why “wired” means both “connected to the internet” and “high, frantic, unable to concentrate”.

These worries are exaggerated. Stick-in-the-muds have always complained about new technologies: the Victorians fussed that the telegraph meant that “the businessman of the present day must be continually on the jump.” And businesspeople have always had to deal with constant pressure and interruptions—hence the word “business”. In his classic study of managerial work in 1973 Henry Mintzberg compared managers to jugglers: they keep 50 balls in the air and periodically check on each one before sending it aloft once more.

Yet clearly there is a problem. It is not merely the dizzying increase in the volume of information (the amount of data being stored doubles every 18 months). It is also the combination of omnipresence and fragmentation. Many professionals are welded to their smartphones. They are also constantly bombarded with unrelated bits and pieces—a poke from a friend one moment, the latest Greek financial tragedy the next.

The data fog is thickening at a time when companies are trying to squeeze ever more out of their workers. A survey in America by Spherion Staffing discovered that 53% of workers had been compelled to take on extra tasks since the recession started. This dismal trend may well continue—many companies remain reluctant to hire new people even as business picks up. So there will be little respite from the dense data smog, which some researchers fear may be poisonous.

They raise three big worries. First, information overload can make people feel anxious and powerless: scientists have discovered that multitaskers produce more stress hormones. Second, overload can reduce creativity. Teresa Amabile of Harvard Business School has spent more than a decade studying the work habits of 238 people, collecting a total of 12,000 diary entries between them. She finds that focus and creativity are connected. People are more likely to be creative if they are allowed to focus on something for some time without interruptions. If constantly interrupted or forced to attend meetings, they are less likely to be creative. Third, overload can also make workers less productive. David Meyer, of the University of Michigan, has shown that people who complete certain tasks in parallel take much longer and make many more errors than people who complete the same tasks in sequence.

Curbing the cacophony

What can be done about information overload? One answer is technological: rely on the people who created the fog to invent filters that will clean it up. Xerox promises to restore “information sanity” by developing better filtering and managing devices. Google is trying to improve its online searches by taking into account more personal information. (Some people fret that this will breach their privacy, but it will probably deliver quicker, more accurate searches.) A popular computer program called “Freedom” disconnects you from the web at preset times.

A second answer involves willpower. Ration your intake. Turn off your mobile phone and internet from time to time.

But such ruses are not enough. Smarter filters cannot stop people from obsessively checking their BlackBerrys. Some do so because it makes them feel important; others because they may be addicted to the “dopamine squirt” they get from receiving messages, as Edward Hallowell and John Ratey, two academics, have argued. And self-discipline can be counter-productive if your company doesn’t embrace it. Some bosses get shirty if their underlings are unreachable even for a few minutes.

Most companies are better at giving employees access to the information superhighway than at teaching them how to drive. This is starting to change. Management consultants have spotted an opportunity. Derek Dean and Caroline Webb of McKinsey urge businesses to embrace three principles to deal with data overload: find time to focus, filter out noise and forget about work when you can. Business leaders are chipping in. David Novak of Yum! Brands urge people to ask themselves whether what they are doing is constructive or a mere “activity”. John Doerr, a venture capitalist, urges people to focus on a narrow range of objectives and filter out everything else. Cristobal Conde of SunGard, an IT firm, preserves “thinking time” in his schedule when he cannot be disturbed. This might sound like common sense. But common sense is rare amid the cacophony of corporate life.

4 SYNCHRONICITY AS ELEMENT IN TEACHING IN ODL

In the ancient legends of Greece, one of the many myths and legends related to Medusa, who had snakes for hair and once you looked into her eyes you were turned into stone. Looking into her eyes, held captive by her gaze, turned many a brave man (yes, according to the myth, no woman confronted her, according to the men who penned these stories...), into stone. Only when Perseus used his shield as a mirror, was he able to decapitate her and use her head to ward off evil.

Many lecturers and other stakeholders at Unisa are held captive by the notion of *synchronous* support as if it was Medusa's gaze. In an ODL institution we embrace face-to-face tutorial support, group discussions, satellite conferencing, and now the latest, interactive television, as if they were long-lost friends. The amount of synchronous student support a lecturer offers has become the gold standard of being a good lecturer. He or she travels to all corners of South Africa (sometimes with a good view on either a mountain, or the sea, or both...), to reach out to those students who "really want to see the lecturer".

My proposition is that synchronous support is exclusionary and functions as Medusa's gaze – holding us captive and turning us into stone.

Often those great defenders of synchronous student support point out to the fact that not all students have access to MyUnisa. They are held so captive by the glorious moment of standing in front of a class and lecturing, that they forget how few students can actually afford to travel to these regional centres to have the privilege of an hour or two with the lecturer.

We are funded *differently* than residential higher education institutions. We are an ODL institution. We are supposed to be open – allowing students to have access to resources *when they have the time to do so*. Synchronous teaching and support is one element in the broader scope of things. The numbers of students that benefit from current synchronous student support (and the cost involved) are outweighed by those who cannot attend these synchronous events. Then we must set into place systems to record those synchronous events and send to students so that we do not exclude anyone. And we must send out yet another tutorial letter to all students.

It is just not sustainable.

Allow me to throw down the gauntlet. Is it not time that we move to well-designed pre-recorded videos which could be made available as part of the study package, as well as produced in shorter podcasts and put on myUnisa – where students can download them, listen to them, watch them on their mobiles, or at home, or where ever they are – when *they* have the need to do so or have the time?

There is so much we can do with regard to asynchronous academic student support, yet we are held captive by the belief that "real time" is the *only* way to go.

5 THE CHALLENGE OF PUTTING A GRADE ON ETHICAL LEARNING

By Peter Schmidt, *The Chronicle*, 3 July 2011 [Read the full article [online](#)]

[Please take note that hyperlinks in this article were removed – read the full article online]

Union College, long focused on engineering and the liberal arts, five years ago adopted a new educational mission: teaching its students to be ethical. It established an Ethics Across the Curriculum program that encourages faculty members to weave discussions of ethics into all of their courses, no matter the subject.

Although faculty throughout the college's four academic divisions have gotten behind the effort, it is hard to tell what, if any, effect it is having.

Here and elsewhere in academe, ethics instruction remains a means to unclear ends.

At a time when policy makers and parents are questioning the usefulness of a liberal education, many colleges have touted their ability to produce graduates with a moral compass. "Ethical reasoning and action" is one of the "essential learning outcomes" that the Association of American Colleges and Universities says is "best developed by a contemporary liberal education." But these days, making that claim is not enough: The accountability movement has put colleges under pressure to assess students' progress in meeting all educational goals. Assessing ethical learning is especially challenging.

Sure, colleges can test students' recall of class lectures or assigned readings. But being able to parrot Plato is a far cry from skilfully applying moral philosophy to today's moral dilemmas.

Lewis S. Davis, an assistant professor at Union College, teaches a course called "The Economics of Sin" that discusses ethically complex economic issues. Anastasia Pease, an English scholar, helped develop the ethics project at Union College. "We like to think that we are making a difference. ... As far as measurement? It's hard."

Colleges might even be able to measure whether their students have become more sophisticated in the thought processes they use in working through ethical problems. But the most widely used instruments for measuring moral reasoning are intended for research or to evaluate institutions, not for student grading, and educators disagree on their validity.

When it comes to measuring whether ethics instruction sticks, making students more likely to do the right thing throughout their lives, about all colleges can do is hope.

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No Right Answers?

Many of the higher-education institutions that have chosen to emphasise such instruction have done so in response to some societal crisis widely attributed to ethical lapses—with the economic collapse of 2008 being the latest event to inspire efforts to promote students' moral betterment. But the truth is that there is no telling whether today's college student will go on to become a mensch or the next Bernie Madoff.

Ethical development lies "at the outermost ring" of the learning outcomes institutions are able to measure, says Trudy W. Banta, a professor of higher education at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis who has extensively studied assessment practices. Of the tests of ethical learning devised so far, she says, "I don't know of anything that is even beginning to be universally accepted."

Among the many challenges in assessing students' development is the lack of universally accepted "right" answers to many moral and ethical problems.

"By definition, you are coming up with some sort of normative value judgment on what the right outcomes are for students," says Richard Arum, professor of sociology and education at New York University and co-author of *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. "It is hard to get objective measures that are not tied in with cultural assumptions."

If colleges send students the message that there exists a correct answer to any given ethical question, Mr. Arum says, they are likely to run into a problem routinely encountered by social scientists whose research involves surveys: People often answer a question with the response they perceive as most acceptable to others, failing to say what they truly believe.

Deni Elliott, a professor of media ethics at the University of South Florida and the founder of ethics centres at both Dartmouth College and the University of Montana, argues that colleges need to separate "instructional objective from pedagogical hope." Although they cannot determine whether they are producing graduates who will make the world better, she says, they can try to determine how well their students grapple with ethical problems.

Union College has left it up to faculty members to individually devise ways to determine how well students absorb and apply ethics lessons. Many of its faculty members gauge learning mainly by judging how well students identify and analyse ethical problems in writing assignments, on essay tests, and in classroom discussions. That approach, widely used throughout academe, puts a premium on ethical reasoning and rewards students for demonstrating critical thinking.

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Response and Reason

When it comes to assessing the moral development of undergraduate students, the most widely used instruments are the Defining Issues Test, or DIT, developed in the early 1970s, and a second-generation version of it, known as the DIT2, developed in 1999.

Stephen J. Thoma, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, oversees worldwide use of the two tests as executive director of the Tuscaloosa-based Centre for the Study of Ethical Development. He estimates that each year about 50 researchers around the world give one of the two tests to a total of about 40,000 people, mostly at colleges and graduate schools. About three-fifths of the tests are administered for the sake of evaluating institutions' or programs' success in ethics education.

James Rest, an educational psychologist at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, devised the Defining Issues Test based on the work of Lawrence Kohlberg, a psychologist at Harvard University and the University of Chicago. Mr. Kohlberg theorised that moral reasoning develops along a six-stage continuum, progressing from judgments based purely on self-interest and the desire to avoid punishment, through judgments based on a desire to obey the law and comply with societal norms, to judgments based on moral principles and ideals.

Whereas Mr. Kohlberg developed a labour-intensive interview to assess the sophistication of his subjects' moral reasoning, the two versions of the Defining Issues Test are administered in a written, multiple-choice format. Test takers read stories posing moral questions, then select from a list of options which course of action the protagonist should take. They then rate how much weight they gave various considerations in reaching their conclusions and rank which considerations most influenced their decisions.

Among the factors researchers have taken into account in attempting to validate the test are differences among respondents of varying ages and educational levels and correlations between test results and the results of various measures of cognitive capacity. Those who give the tests, either in writing or online, are supposed to submit subjects' answers to the Centre for the Study of Ethical Development, to be scored for a fee.

Whose Values?

Early on, the Defining Issues Test was suspected of being biased against women, based heavily on assertions by Carol Gilligan, a psychologist now at New York University, that Mr. Kohlberg's theory of moral development placed more value on an individualistic, rights-based approach to morality than she attributed to men than on the relationship- and caring-based approach she attributed to women. Numerous studies of the test, however, have found that, if anything, women do slightly better on it than men. [...]

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Among the concerns raised is that the test has an inherent liberal bias. Based on Mr. Kohlberg's theories and calibrated partly to the moral reasoning used by graduate students in philosophy and political science, the test rewards subjects who, for example, say that a man would be justified in stealing an otherwise-inaccessible drug for his dying wife or that a doctor should grant a terminally ill patient's wish to be provided a fatal dose of a painkiller.

The debate over the bias accusation has a chicken-and-egg dimension, with proponents of the test saying advanced moral reasoning generally leads to liberal views, and critics saying the test incorporates liberal views into its criteria for advanced moral reasoning.

With its multiple-choice format, the test also might overstate moral-reasoning ability by assessing people's capacity to recognise advanced reasoning, not their ability to actually engage in it.

The influence of cognitive ability and prior learning on test scores also raises concerns. If students at a highly selective college do well the first time they take the test, asks Ms. Banta, of Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis, does it hold much value as a measure of students' moral growth?

Mr. Baker has similarly decided not to use the test at Union College, based on his observation that students in some fields, such as engineering and business, tend to do worse than others on it, and that students' scores can fluctuate markedly as they move through their majors. "I am not sure what, in the end, it measures," he says.

The organisation that oversees the test, the Centre for the Study of Ethical Development, discourages the use of the defining-issues tests in assigning grades, although it does regard giving students feedback based on test results as acceptable.

Among the others who have sought to develop ways to measure ethical learning, the Association of American Colleges and Universities has created a rubric for evaluating ethical learning displayed in students' work. It includes benchmarks for measuring students' ethical self-awareness, capacity to recognise ethical issues, and ability to understand, apply, and justify the use of different ethical perspectives and concepts. Terrel L. Rhodes, vice president of the association's office of quality, curriculum, and assessment, estimates that several hundred colleges have used its ethics rubric since the document was released in 2009.

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Preaching and Practice

Union College began a pilot version of its ethics-instruction program, in economics, in 2003, and expanded the effort to other academic programs three years later. The undertaking has been financed by Michael S. Rapaport, a 1959 graduate who conceived it in response to the ethical blindness shown by executives caught up in the Enron financial-reporting scandal of 2001. He says it bothered him that people with advanced degrees, some from the nation's most prestigious universities, "did not have a clue that they had done anything wrong." [...]

Claire M. Bracken, assistant professor of English at Union College and a member of the steering committee for its ethics-education effort, says she is hopeful that getting students "passionate and engaged with these issues" will lead them to retain the ethics lessons learned in college classrooms and behave more ethically throughout life.

But, she acknowledges, "There is no good way of knowing what they are thinking when they leave."

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

6 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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