



ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 65, 29 JUNE 2011

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1 HOW MANY... (REVISITED)?

After last week's questions regarding the workload of students such as how many assignments are actually necessary in a 120 notional hours' module; a lecturer responded with asking a number of 'how many' questions relating to *the ever-increasing workload of lecturers*. I have rephrased his/her questions as follows...

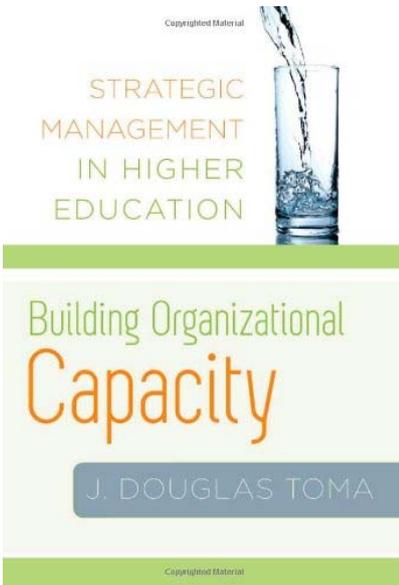
What can be *reasonably* expected from lecturers?

How many learning experiences can one lecturer design according to the prescriptions of the "Framework for a team approach in curriculum and learning development" whilst *also* compiling tutorial letters, assignment feedback tutorial letters, examination preparation tutorial letters, examination feedback tutorial letters, choosing and updating prescribed materials, do the training required for onscreen marking, marking assignments, finding open educational resources and assessing their quality and appropriateness, finding tutors, training tutors, quality assuring tutors and writing tutor manuals, answering student inquiries, marking examination scripts, doing discipline specific research, doing ODL research on the scholarship of teaching and learning, attending meetings and training events, doing community engagement and contributing to different institutional committees and teams... and, of course, filling in performance agreements and templates ad nauseum to provide evidence that you deserve your salary per month.

How many? How much? At what cost? With what support?

How much is too much?

2 BUILDING ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY



How many students can Unisa handle? Can we continue to grow unabated or is there a limit to what we can handle? With millions of youngsters between the ages of 18-24 being unemployed and not in education, can we close the door to them because we don't have the capacity?

Should we be everything to everyone? How far does our social mandate stretch to provide access to those unfortunate students being turned away at other higher education institutions? Or is there a limit to what we have the capacity to do?

Prof Subotzky sent me a link to a book called "Building organisational capacity", by J. Douglas Toma (2010). What a surprise it was to find a book that actually faces the complexities of the phenomenon it describes and tries to untangle *some* of the challenges without prescribing Zam-buk ointment for open wounds, or eating beetroot to combat HIV and Aids...

Although a huge part of the book deals with case studies from a range of American higher education institutions (none from an ODL environment); I nevertheless found the book an intriguing and enriching read. I must admit, however, that I smiled when reading of their lecturer: student ratios of 12:1..... And then they talk about capacity...

Even though reading these case studies was mildly frustrating, Toma (2010) provides a very intriguing and at times very sobering background to the challenges higher education is facing. He writes: "The administrative foundation required to support ... expansive institutional aspirations, however, is less emphasised by leaders" (Toma 2010:1). *Does this ring a bell?* Throughout the book Toma (2010) interrogates the notion of 'organisational capacity' in often profound ways. The various questions he poses are very appropriate for Unisa at this stage of our ODL journey; if we would care to listen.

Do we have the capacity to make ODL work? Toma's (2010) main proposal is a "building of capacity" (BOC) framework which is based on the premise that issues such as organisational structure, governance, policies, infrastructure, culture, processes and information are all determined by the organisation's *purpose*. He continues to explore this notion by asking a number of questions: How deeply are the aspirations of the institution shared amongst all staff? Is there clarity on the purpose of the institution? Is the institution configured correctly to accommodate the people it is now recruiting?

Do the policies in the institution support (or contradict) its aspirations? Do the structures and infrastructure of the institution support (or contradict) its aspirations? What about the culture of the organisation – does it support (or frustrates and torpedoes) the purpose of the institution?

Toma (2010:6) phrases the main elements of his proposed BOC framework as follows:

1. **Purposes** – why are we here and where are we headed?
2. **Structure** – how are we configured to do our work?
3. **Governance** – who makes what decisions?
4. **Policies** – what rules do we proceed under?
5. **Information** – what do we need to inform our decision making?
6. **Processes** – how do we get things done?
7. **Infrastructure** – what are our human, physical, technological, and financial assets?
8. **Culture** – what is our essential character?

These questions function as *non-linear* framework emphasising the web surrounding the purpose of the organisation and the interconnections between these different elements (Toma 2010:7). *Central to this web is the institution's sense (and understanding) of its purpose.*

One of the best chapters in the book is the chapter on “Strategic management and systems thinking” (Toma 2010: 15-34). I found the chapter very informative and stimulating. Toma (2010:24) quotes Jim Collins who states that “building a great company is cumulative; it does not depend on a great event, but instead relies on building momentum through disciplined people, disciplined thought, and then disciplined action”. Great institutions (distinguished from ‘good’ institutions by Collins) “latch onto one great idea and stay with it, cutting those things that do not fit” (Toma 2010:24).

Toma (2010:26) further moots the notion that the complexities modern institutions face necessitate *that we move away from easy cause-and-effect explanations but consider the intricate and intertwined complex webs of relationships and interactions.*

Allow me a digression? When thinking of the frustrations with the sending out of DVD recordings to students, or the appointment of tutors, or whatever other dilemma we may face – it is so easy to think in terms of cause-and-effect, throw money, staff or (yet) another policy at the problem with the expectation that it will solve the problem. *It doesn't.* It actually makes the problem worse. We have to realise (and accept) that the success of ODL is the result of intricate and intertwined complex webs of relationships and interactions. If we do not take this into consideration, ODL cannot and will not work.

Toma (2010) continues to discuss some of the challenges facing higher education – and many of these challenges resemble those that we face at Unisa.

Among the trends in higher education that Toma (2010: 35-53) discusses are

- The increasing commoditisation of higher education in an environment marked by stiff competition and institutions' purposes "becoming more connected with individual gain than with social good".
- Higher education institutions are increasingly in the race for more prestige and acknowledgement on the different ranking systems.
- The increase in nondiscretionary spending.
- Increasing demands from national governments and regulatory bodies.
- "...universities and colleges are cutting expenses and seeking greater agility by shifting faculty staffing away from tenure-significant positions toward temporary, part-time and adjunct ones".
- The increasing influence and numbers of administrators while faculty is reduced. "Whether adding administrators and reducing faculty has improved institutions, ultimately making them more efficient, is an open question, however".
- Faculty no longer has the most important say in who may teach, what may be taught, how it shall be taught, and who may be admitted to study.

In the rest of the book, Toma (2010) uses case studies from a range of American higher education institutions to examine the different elements in building organisational capacity (BOC) as intertwined and complex dynamic systems. For example, in exploring an institution's sense and understanding of its purposes Toma (2010:71-72) asks the following questions:

- How does the institution understand its mission and aspirations?
- Does how the institution is configured to do its work align with what have come to be its purposes?
- Are the right people making various decisions, given the nature of the institution?
- Does an institution need to change various policies and processes in order to support an initiative such as a new curriculum and related changes at the institution?
- Along these lines, what data is needed to support effective decision making at the institution, and is communication a barrier to it realising its missions and aspirations?
- What infrastructure is required to support the curriculum and, ultimately, the purposes of the institution?
- Has the culture of the institution evolved to match its changing purposes?

These questions are used throughout the book to explore the different elements of his capacity building (BOC) framework.

Despite finding the case studies not very applicable to our context as ODL institution, I really think the questions Toma (2010) poses can be used fruitfully at Unisa as we implement ODL:

- Does *everyone* at Unisa share a common understanding of what ODL means for the character, curricula, pedagogies, design of learning, etc at Unisa? This is crucial for the success of the implementation of ODL. If regional facilities, or academics, management or administrators have different ideas about what it means to be an ODL institution, *we are in deep trouble*. The sense of purpose and calling of Unisa as a comprehensive ODL institution should (and could) be a centre that holds different initiatives and strategic drives – but if there is no centre, things fall apart (with apologies to Achebe).
- If we have a shared understanding of what ODL means for who we are, who we want to be; are our *structures* serving our aspirations? Or do our structures frustrate becoming what we want to be?
- In order to realise our shared (and agreed upon) understanding of what ODL means, are the right people making the decisions?
- How do our various *policies* and *processes* serve ODL? Or are our policies and processes reminiscent of a correspondence institution with 30 000 students back in 1970? What policies and processes do we need to realise ODL? The successful implementation of ODL requires (demands...?) a different take on our structures, our policies, our processes, and the type of people we appoint, our performance agreements and so forth.
- What *data* do we need to inform our thinking about ODL? How readily available is the data to whom? Who will analyse and make sense of the data? How should these analyses be shared and interrogated and by whom?
- What *infrastructure* do we need in becoming an ODL institution? Do we need more offices for lecturers or should we allow lecturers to work from home? Do we need more lecture rooms or should we embrace the affordances of technology?
- What are the implications of ODL for the *culture* of Unisa – our symbols, our language (our proverbs, songs, metaphors, gestures, jargon), our narratives (the stories we tell, our legends, sagas and myths), our practices (our rituals, taboos, rites, ceremonials)?

The successful implementation of ODL cannot happen in a haphazard way where every college or stakeholder runs into different directions. It is essential that we have a shared understanding of what ODL looks like in *our* context. That is the starting point.

Since 2007 we have developed a much clearer sense of what ODL is than ever before. After reading Toma's (2010) book, I realised how far we still have to go.

I also realised how far we've come...

3 ONCE UPON A TIME....

Once upon a time when the world was round, the air was clean and a mouse was something that ate cheese, there was a university who offered correspondence courses to its students. Students had to do assignments and then send them to the university using the country's postal service. When the assignments arrived, one group of people opened the envelopes to take out the assignments. Another group of people recorded which assignments came in. Then another group of people took these assignments in trolleys to very clever people who would mark the assignments. After the clever people marked these assignments, a person pushing a trolley collected these marked scripts and took them to a room where another group put these marked scripts in envelopes by hand, and another group took them to the country's postal service where they were posted back to students.

It all worked well because the university had enough space, people and there were less than 40,000 students. But then the university grew...

Despite the fact that this university grew to having close to 300, 000 students and the world is less round – nothing changed at the university. Students still do assignments and then send them to the university using the country's postal service. When the assignments arrive, one group of people opens the envelopes to take out the assignments. Another group of people records which assignments came in. Then another group of people takes these assignments in trolleys to very clever (but now overworked) people who would mark the assignments. After the clever (and overworked) people mark these assignments, a person pushing a trolley collects these marked scripts and takes them to a room where another group put these marked scripts in envelopes by hand, and another group takes them to the country's postal service where the assignments are posted back to students.

No one in the university notices that the world was less round, the air was less clean and there were more technologies than just chisels, stone arrowheads and trolleys.

3 THE DIGITAL DIVIDE... AND I AM NOT TALKING ABOUT OUR STUDENTS' ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGIES...

Mention "access to technologies" and you set the cat amongst the pigeons. Almost immediately you have a range of claims and counter-claims. There are those who claim that more students have access to the Internet than we generally assume. Then there are those somewhere in the middle who are always concerned about those students *not* having access. And then there are those who claim that far fewer students have access to the Internet than is generally alleged.

While there is disagreement amongst these groups on the extent of the digital divide, most agree that *graduateness* in today's world requires our graduates to be au fait with a range of web-enabled technologies and devices.

Most agree that in order to be a successful graduate (and employable) in the 21st century, graduates *have to be more than computer literate* – they have to be totally at ease with functioning in online learning environments. To be lifelong learners will increasingly also mean to learn online...

But (today) I am not talking about the ‘digital divide’ today as it relates to *students*. I want to start a conversation on how computer literate should *lecturers* be in an ODL institution? What are the minimum requirements for teaching in an ODL environment? *Is it acceptable that academics teach in an ODL institution while being computer illiterate?* What are the minimum capacities we need from our teaching staff in an ODL environment?

While I don’t think anyone would support the notion that all academic staff should have the latest device in their bags and in their pockets; I suspect most would agree that technological developments over the last 5 years have passed by many academics without them noticing. *How can computer illiterate lecturers produce computer literate students who can function competently in online and networked environments?*

Let me immediately add a disclaimer or a confession before someone is hired to break my legs.

I would not describe myself as being an example of someone who is knowledgeable regarding all technologies, networks, social technologies, bites, androids, different operating systems and whatever. Many colleagues in the myUnisa team and in ICT are often frustrated with the terminology I used and things I get mixed up.

Yes, I do have a Facebook profile, but somehow it does not work for me. (At one stage it did). I have a Twitter account – but somehow the amount of information I already deal with on an hourly basis prevents me from having any inclination to find out whether someone just brushed her teeth or is late for work, or whatever. Somehow Twitter is not for me. I get electronic feeds from three international newspapers and updates on a range of recently published scholarly articles. I am currently barely coping with the amount of information that is already available.

Though I find reading scholarly articles on a screen very frustrating, I find the potential of online conferencing tools such as Wimba, Elluminate, and BigBlueButton fascinating with huge potential in an ODL context. I can make podcasts. I have done training in using Camtasia – but I just don’t have the time to experiment and practice. I have a basic Nokia mobile phone which I use to phone, to check my e-mails and to send and receive texts. I want to buy an iPad just to make my life easier but somehow my budget does not allow this expense. But do I really want to take my iPad to bed to read in bed. Mmmm, me thinks not. Not now. My bed is my place of refuge after a very long day at work.

I started to read “[Stuff](#)” – a magazine dedicated to share the latest on a range of devices. I am reading a number of blogs by people like [Tony Bates](#) and [George Siemens](#). I meet regularly with my overseas research partners in a free Elluminate ‘room’ – where we share texts, graphics and links.

I don’t know whether it is my age, my personality, or a combination of my budget, interests, commitments, etc – but I wish I was more computer or technology literate. But I am trying.

How techy-savvy should lecturers in an ODL environment be?

If we have to ‘produce’ computer literate graduates who can function competently and with ease in networked environments, can we afford to not commit ourselves to become more computer literate than we are?

4 HOW CALIFORNIANS MIGHT BE CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE...

[Received from Prof Pam Ryan]

Written by Tina Barseghian

For those who can’t afford or don’t have access to computers, can smart phones serve as substitutes?

The question of whether mobile devices can close the digital divide between the haves and have-nots came up again yesterday with the release of a [report by the Public Policy Institute of California](#).

Among many other findings, the report concluded that “although Latinos are the group least likely to have a computer or Internet access at home, Latinos who use their cell phones to go online are twice as likely as whites (40% to 21%) to say that they mostly access the Internet this way.”

Overall, why are Californians going online? All the reasons you might imagine: checking the latest news, using social network sites, buying stuff.

91% of adults said they don’t use their cell phones to go online for educational purposes.

What might be surprising is that 45 percent say they’re going online to “pursue educational purposes.”

But when asked, “Do you ever use your **cell phone** to go online for educational purposes, such as online training or for taking a class?” 91 percent said no.

Granted, the report targets adults, not kids. Still, I wonder how many kids would answer yes.

Furthermore, what kind of learning is best suited for mobile devices, and what's best for computers? I asked [Mimi Ito](#), a cultural anthropologist who studies new media use in young people, [to offer her perspective](#).

In the meantime, some more interesting stats to consider from the CCIP report, in regards to technology use in schools, quoted here:

- There is a consensus about teaching computer and Internet skills in public school: an overwhelming majority of adults say it is very important (76%) or somewhat important (18%), and across political parties, demographic groups, and regions strong majorities hold this view.
- 63% of these parents report visiting their child's school website often or sometimes (61% in 2009, 56% in 2008). Parents earning \$80,000 or more (89%) are twice as likely as parents earning under \$40,000 (44%) to visit their child's school website. Among those who do not visit their child's school website, 63 percent say the school does have a website as far as they know.
- 32% of parents say they receive their child's homework assignments via the Internet or email (34% in 2009, 28% in 2008). Among those who do not receive their child's assignments via the Internet or email, 71 percent say their child's teachers do not send assignments this way as far as they know.

Source: <http://mindshift.kged.org/2011/06/how-californians-might-be-closing-the-digital-divide/>

5 UNISA GETTING A CARTE ROUGES ON CARTE BLANCHE

This was not an event to be proud of... In case you have missed it, see the following link:

http://www.studynoteswiki.com/index.php?option=com_kunena&Itemid=54&func=view&catid=43&id=15414

Unisa was red-carded this week in an expose on the TV programme Carte Blanche. Despite some embarrassing comments, there were also comments such as:

While I have only done 1 semester so far and am a 'newbie' at this Unisa thing I do feel incredibly fortunate to have a facility that allows me to complete tertiary studies. Before I started on this journey I (and loved ones) asked why would I study at this stage of my life. The answer is simple 'to learn' anything else is a bonus.

UNISA has given me the opportunity to follow that path and I am willing to cut them a bit of slack. Without UNISA there would be no tertiary studies for me and that would be a infinitely worse than having to wait for exam results.

And:

I've been with UNISA for almost 5 years now and apart from some minor problems in the past, I can honestly say that I'm happy with UNISA and their services. Yes, sometimes I don't get adequate feedback from lecturers, but I also remember a few fantastic lectures that went out of their way to help me. As for the exam results, I'm always one of the first to complain about not receiving my results on time, but considering the amount of students at UNISA maybe it's time I learnt a little patience.

But then again a comment like the following makes we want to cry:

I'm also still a newbie at Unisa, just finished my 2nd semester but boy of boy, problems right from the start. They lost one of my answer sheet in my first semester, and it didn't go missing along the way, it went missing in Pretoria after they received it.

It was a mission just to get someone to speak to me and a whole semester of fighting to get them to do something about it. It was so frustrating and it took a lot of focus away from my current studies. I think it is pretty unfair to have to rewrite exams if they are so irresponsible to loose such important documents. Any way, we'll see what happens in the future. Hopefully they will work on these problems.

Will students (and lecturers) believe us when we say we are really trying our best to prevent this from happening again?

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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