



ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 67, 13 JULY 2011

IN THIS ISSUE:

- 1 *The limits of student centeredness in ODL?*
- 2 *The filter bubble. What the Internet is hiding from you...*
- 3 *How to measure the workload of faculty...*
- 4 *A celebration of the work of the different ODL Task teams*
- 5 *60 days to go...*
- 6 *ODL repository and blog*

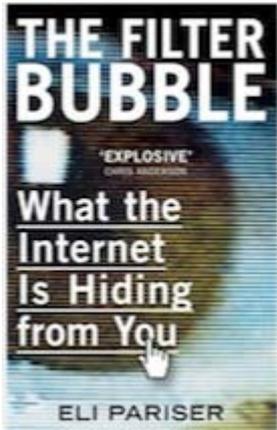
1 THE LIMITS OF STUDENT CENTREDNESS IN ODL?

What are the outer boundaries of student centeredness? *Are there any boundaries or are our students always right and do we have to meet their demands no matter what these demands are?* How does our character as an *ODL* institution shape what we provide and commit ourselves to? What are the boundaries of the responsibility of Unisa as ODL institution? What are our students entitled to? Well-designed teaching and learning experiences? Absolutely. Appropriate and affordable support? Yes. But what about the following...

The increasing intake of younger students (a) who are straight from high school and (b) who are unemployed and are between 18 and 25 years of age is beginning to have an impact on services that the University is provide versus what these cohorts are expecting. For instance, most of these students would begin to insist on library services in ways that is done in contact universities. They would want to have study spaces on full-time basis. They would want eating spaces in ways that may lead to demands for catering services that may have to be monitored and/or even provided by the University. Numerous of them are moving closer to our urban campuses/ regions just to study with Unisa. An increasing number of students may begin to call for Unisa to provide residences. At present there are more than 6,000 students on the Durban campus per day. That is more students than Rhodes University...

Whilst we should not dismiss these claims as youthful whims, we cannot (and should not) compromise our ODL character. Surely there are limits to student centeredness? Surely there are limits to what an ODL institution can be? Or is ODL limitless? We are funded vastly differently than residential institutions. Our character is different. Our pricing structure is different. We cannot dismiss these trends as passing. The question is: How will we respond?

2 THE FILTER BUBBLE. WHAT THE INTERNET IS HIDING FROM YOU...



What a joy it is to find a book that intrigues, entices and deconstructs the popular notion that the Internet is the great leveller and equaliser where no one knows that you are a dog...

Eli Pariser's (2011) book "The filter bubble. What the Internet is hiding from you" is a very intriguing read – at least for me. I will not be able to give a total review in one communiqué – but rather share it with you as I progress. It raises so many issues that I just can't rush this one!

In the Introduction to the book Pariser (2011:2) writes: " Most of us assume that when we google a term, we all see the same results – the ones that the company's famous Page rank algorithm suggests are the most authoritative based on other pages' links. But since December 2009, this is no longer true. Now you get the result that Google's algorithm suggests is *best for you in particular* – and someone else may see something entirely different. In other words, there is no standard Google anymore" (emphasis added).

I never knew this. I just naively believed that what I get out of a search, others will also get. Not so. The interesting thing is that if we ask students to google a term or issue, they will most probably receive different results – and we will therefore not be able to judge their results as if there would have been a universal list of results...

Pariser (2011:3) pinpoints the turning point for using the Internet on December 4, 2009 when "the era of personalisation began". The hype surrounding the Internet which celebrates the levelling of the playing field where everyone has access to the 'same' information, turned to be short-lived. Everything changed on that day. Since then we all received information depending on our profiles stored on search engines... This results that we increasingly see the world through our own eyes...

"Democracy requires citizens to see things from one another's point of view, but instead we're more and more enclosed in our own bubbles" (Pariser 2011:5). This change is brought about by a new generation of Internet filters that build up a history of what you like and search for and increasingly give you what you are looking for based on your past searches (Pariser 2011:9). According to Pariser (2011: 9-10) this brings about three dynamics that we've never dealt with before:

1. The filters customise the world according to your tastes and therefore you are increasingly in your own bubble.

[Continues on the next page]

2. These filter bubbles are invisible. You have no input to determine whether the filters' assumptions are right or wrong – “from within the bubble, it's nearly impossible to see how biased it is” (Pariser 2011:10).
3. “You don't choose to enter the bubble” – they make choices on your behalf, “driving up profits for the Web sites that use them, [and] they'll become harder and harder to avoid” (Pariser 2011:10).

What I particularly found fascinating is Pariser's (2011:10-20) exploration of why these filters came into being. He mentions the fact that we are all facing an increasing torrent of information – 900,000 blogs, 50 million tweets, more than 60 million Facebook status updates, and 210 billion e-mails are sent *every day*...

Not only are the servers not able to keep up with the increasing flow of information, but we need new units of measurement to describe clusters of data (Pariser 2011:11). All of us trying to deal on a daily basis with this onslaught of data and information are also experiencing an “attention crash” (Steve Rubel in Pariser 2011:11). So, when we are offered a filter to ensure that we don't receive what we are not looking for; we are inclined to grab it (Pariser 2011:11)! The proponents of personalisation “offer a vision of a custom-tailored world, every facet fits us perfectly. It's a cosy place, populated by our favourite people and things and ideas” (Pariser 2011:12). While this is an appealing prospect, “we may lose some of the traits that made the Internet so appealing to begin with” (Pariser 2011:12).

The filtering of content is acting like a camera lens between us and the real world (Pariser 2011:13) showing you what you want to see. And this, according to Pariser (2011:13) is a powerful position to be in... These filters then serve up “a kind of invisible auto propaganda, indoctrinating us with our own ideas, amplifying our desire for things that are familiar and leaving us oblivious to the dangers lurking in the dark territory of the unknown” (Pariser 2011:15). In these self-created and self-perpetuating spaces, “there's less room for the chance encounters that bring insight and learning. Creativity is often sparked by the collision of ideas from different disciplines and cultures” (Pariser 2011:15). Pariser (2011:15) warns: “If personalisation is too acute, it could prevent us from coming into contact with the mind-blowing, preconception-shattering experiences and ideas that change how we think about the world and ourselves”.

The (even) darker side of the story is the fact that “you're not the only person with a vested interest in your data” (Pariser 2011:15). Personalisation is “based on a bargain. In exchange for the service of filtering, you hand large companies an enormous amount of data about your daily life – much of which you might not trust your friends with” (Pariser 2011:16). “When you enter a filter bubble, you're letting the companies that construct it choose which options you're aware of.

[Continues on the next page]

You may think you're the captain of your own destiny, but personalisation can lead you down a road to a kind of informational determinism in which what you've clicked on in the past determines what you see next – a Web history you're doomed to repeat. You can get stuck in a static, ever-narrowing version of yourself – an endless you-loop" (Pariser 2011:16).

Another interesting (even if dark) aspect of these "endless you-loops" is that it creates a certain type of social capital. When groups that are alike and share values and ideas, they create "bonding capital". When people of different backgrounds and value systems meet, the amount of "bridging capital" determines the success of the endeavour. "Bridging capital is potent: Build more of it and you're likely to be able to find that next job or an investor for your small business, because it allows you to tap into lots of different networks for help" (Pariser 2011:17).

The filters on the Internet create a lot of "bonding capital" and very little "bridging capital" (Pariser 2011:17). "Without knowing it we may be giving ourselves a kind of global lobotomy" (Pariser 2011:19). Pariser (2011:19) continues: "From megacities to nanotech, we're creating a global society whose complexity has passed the limits of individual comprehension. The problems we'll face in the next twenty years – energy shortages, terrorism, climate change, and disease – are enormous in scope. They're problems that we can only solve together" (Pariser 2011:19).

Pariser (2011:19) therefore petitions all of us to be more critical and to "pull back the curtain" – to understand and promote an understanding of what the Internet has become and the impact the lobotomisation will have on all of us. We "need to understand what all this means for our politics, our culture, and our future" (Pariser 2011:20).

The above section covers only the Introduction to Pariser's (2011) book. Now you can understand why I was so taken up by his argument. In next week's communiqué, I will continue to share Pariser's (2011) thoughts.

Reading Pariser's (2011) book prompted the following reflections:

- Is it not time that Unisa develop a module on interrogating the often hidden and dark impacts various technologies and the Internet have on our notions of democracy, citizenship, human rights, etc? Don't we need an interdisciplinary module on the "philosophy of technology" – providing our students with critical abilities to interrogate the mostly assumed affordances of technology? Can we afford *not* to have such a module?
- My second point builds on the above point. We are in the process of going the extra mile to increase students' access to the Internet. *But the Internet is not an unqualified good* – as Pariser (2011) and others (e.g. Carr 2010) have pointed out. Is it ethical to increase students' access to the Internet *without* warning them or at least empower them to be on the alert for hidden agendas and the impact of filter bubbles?

[Continues on the next page]

- When I read Pariser's (2011) description of the filters, I had shivers down my spine – because much of what he said with regard to the function of filters, reminded me of the way we develop curricula at Unisa...

How many of our curricula are examples of *lecturers'* choice of filters, aiming to clone *lecturers'* views on the world? How many of our curricula actually result in lobotomised and uncritical students who can parrot their way through their studies and graduate whilst never encountering (or allowed to encounter...) divergent views on the world? How many of our curricula actually results in inbreeding – where lecturers prescribe one another's texts as prescribed materials? How do our curricula hide 'stuff' from students? Many lecturers refer to the content in modules as the information they 'cover' in a semester. Is it not time to 'uncover' issues and *not* try to cover auto propaganda in service of the discipline or the departmental guardians of the truth?

- How do the processes and organisational culture at Unisa lobotomise academic discourse and dissident views? How does the current organisational culture nurture and sustain "bonding capital" while we actually urgently need "bridging capital"?

My sense of the future is that we need less "bonding capital" at Unisa and in South Africa, and more "bridging capital" – living *with* divergent views and making sense of a world of divergent and many voices. Or are we so cosy in our filter bubbles of auto propaganda that we could not care less?

3 HOW TO MEASURE THE WORLOAD OF FACULTY

[The Chronicle](#), July 10 2011

By Audrey Williams June

Some people might consider Carlos L. Aiken's job pretty cushy. At a glance, anyone can see that he taught a total of 45 students at the University of Texas at Dallas in a recent academic year, while earning a six-figure salary. Like many scholars, the geosciences professor is spending much of this summer off campus, including doing research in Scotland and Wales.

But what the public often doesn't see, and what politicians often don't measure, is how Mr. Aiken spends most of the rest of his time. He supervises graduate students, writes grants to keep his research afloat, and recently he gave a presentation on "3D virtual geology" to a local chapter of the Society of Independent Professional Earth Scientists. He's working on and off throughout the summer, even though the time he puts in is not factored into his pay. And his travels are mostly job-related.

[Continues on the next page]

The half-dozen graduate students whom he supervises rely on weekly meetings with Mr. Aiken to help shape their research plans. Face-to-face discussions with officials of companies like Shell Oil, which underwrite his research, are a must. He spent two weeks doing fieldwork in a west-Texas town in 104-degree weather, to be followed by the trans-Atlantic trip with one of his undergraduate students in tow. [...]

Yet Mr. Aiken, like thousands of his colleagues across the University of Texas system, recently saw his professional work boiled down to data points—number of classes and students taught in the previous academic year, grant money awarded, and average student-evaluation scores among them [emphasis added]. That information hardly reflects the full range of activities that professors like him engage in year-round. But it is part of a vast data file that University of Texas officials compiled at the request of a task force on productivity and excellence formed by the system's Board of Regents this year. The university made the data public in early May, after repeated open-records requests from news media.

Faculty productivity, or the lack thereof, is a common concern raised by politicians and others looking for inefficiencies and waste in higher education, especially when budgets are tight. Lawmakers often go out of their way to contrast the everyday employee who works 9 to 5 or longer at the office, or who pulls extra shifts doing manual labour, *with the stereotypes of the elitist academic who teaches one or two hour-long courses a few times a week, takes summers off, and travels to far-flung places in the name of research [emphasis added].*

Even within higher education, a professor's workload is seen by some as a source of bloat. When colleges' chief financial officers recently surveyed by *The Chronicle* were asked what single strategy they would adopt to cut costs or increase revenue if they didn't have to worry about any repercussions, increasing teaching loads topped the list. Close to two in five respondents favoured such a move, which ranked well above strategies like increasing tuition, eliminating tenure, and hiring more adjunct faculty.[...]

What to Measure

For legislators and the general public, faculty productivity is often shorthand for counting up how many classes and students professors teach. Politicians and taxpayers who clamour for colleges to cut costs see requiring professors to teach more as one of the easiest ways to save money and, subsequently, stave off further increases in tuition. Colleges, these critics say, would be better off if they de-emphasized research and focused more on teaching, particularly undergraduates.

But many academic researchers say the focus on how much time faculty members spend in the classroom ignores what they produce at work. Such a narrow view of faculty life is damaging to the reputations of professors and their institutions, says Vicki J. Rosser, an associate professor of higher education at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas. [Continues on the next page]

"I don't think that higher education does a good job communicating what we do and what we produce," says Ms. Rosser, an author of a journal paper on workload issues and faculty-productivity measures. To be sure, there are professors on every campus who have earned the "deadwood" label, she says. They lecture from yellowed notes, haven't published new research in years, and don't reach out to undergraduates or junior faculty members. When such slackers surface in higher education, "people love to generalize that everybody's like that," says Ms. Rosser. "But that's not the case. Faculty members, in general, are highly motivated people."

Many of them work 60-hour weeks, she notes, to complete the tasks that go along with being a professor. [...] Experts and professors in general say they don't mind the measuring of faculty work. What they're against is so much of what they do being left out of the equation. They are concerned about data elements that are incorrect, misleading, and not complete enough to allow outsiders to get an accurate picture of how professors use their time inside and outside of the classroom.

Indeed, few productivity reports issued by lawmakers or higher-education watchdog groups acknowledge ancillary activities such as advising students, serving on committees, writing grants, and mentoring students and junior faculty, Ms. Rosser says. And outcomes such as career-placement records and pass rates on certification exams—both of which depend on faculty work for success—are rarely counted, either, experts say. [...]

Read the full article [online](#).

4 A CELEBRATION OF THE WORK OF THE DIFFERENT ODL TASK TEAMS

At the Senate meeting of 15 June the last ODL Task Team report served and was approved with acclamation. While a number of smaller working teams are continuing with the implementation of various aspects of the ODL project, the work of the *original* six ODL Task teams has now finally come to an end.

On Wednesday morning, 3 August, Prof Maré (Vice Principal Academic: Teaching and Learning) will host a breakfast in honour of all the members of the original ODL task teams. The breakfast will take place in the Protea Restaurant from 08:30-10:00. All the members of the original ODL task teams will receive their personalised invite via e-mail by latest on Wednesday afternoon, 13 July 2011. If you have been part of the six ODL Task teams since 2010, and you have not received an invitation by tomorrow afternoon, please feel free to bring it to our attention? We really do not want to leave anyone out. Since 2010 a number of staff members were co-opted to the teams, and our lists may not be complete. If you have not received your personalised invitation by Wednesday afternoon 13 July, please send us a reminder at mombelt@unisa.ac.za and we will send you an invite?

5 SIXTY DAYS TO GO...

In 60 days' time the Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning Festival will start in the Senate Hall. And what a festival it will be!

As we finalise the different elements of the programme, we are becoming increasingly excited *and* worried... We are excited because of the quality of international and local speakers and workshop facilitators, as well as the wonderful and stimulating programme. Our worries are almost equal to the excitement. We realise that the Senate Hall can only host 230 people and the different workshops will be limited to a relatively small number of people. Though we will repeat most of the workshops, if you don't register early, you may miss out! In the next week's communiqué, I will share the programme of the festival so that you can plan which sessions you want to register for. The registration opens on **1 August at 08:00** and once the number of possible participants has been reached, your name will be put on a waiting list.

Walala, wasala... You snooze, you lose ☺.

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.

Drafted by Dr Paul Prinsloo

ODL Coordinator

Office of the Vice-Principal Academic: Teaching and Learning

Unisa

13 July 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.