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1 UNISA 2011 FESTIVAL: KEYNOTE ONE - GEORGE SIEMENS

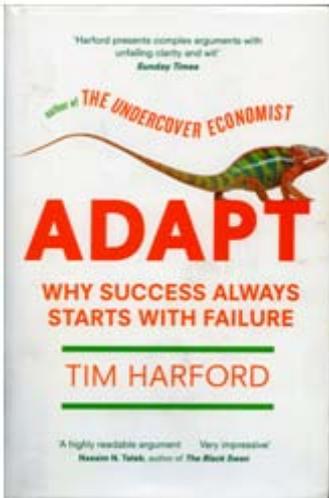


The first keynote of the Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning Festival - *A new world: curriculum, pedagogy and technology in transition*, will be by George Siemens, a strategist and researcher at the Technology Enhanced Knowledge Research Institute at Athabasca University.

George Siemens is writer, theorist, speaker, and researcher on learning, networks, technology, analytics and visualization, openness, and organizational effectiveness in digital environments. He is the author

of *Knowing Knowledge*, an exploration of how the context and characteristics of knowledge have changed and what it means to organizations today, and the *Handbook of Emerging Technologies for Learning*. Siemens is currently a researcher and strategist with the Technology Enhanced Knowledge Research Institute at Athabasca University. In fall 2011, AU Press will publish his co-edited text of *Personal Learning Environments and Networks*. Previously, he was the Associate Director, Research and Development, with the Learning Technologies Centre at University of Manitoba. Siemens has pioneered open connectivist courses that have included over 10,000 educators and students as participants. He is a frequent keynote speaker at conferences detailing the influence of technology and media on education, organizations, and society, having presented at conferences in more than 30 countries. His work has been profiled in provincial, national, and international newspapers, radio, and television. Siemens has maintained the elearnspace blog (www.elearnspace.org/blog) for eleven years and www.connectivism.ca for six years. [Source: <http://www.educause.edu/Community/MemDir/Profiles/GeorgeSiemens/57433>]

2 CONFLICT OR: HOW ORGANISATIONS LEARN. TIM HARFORD (2)



In the second chapter of his book “Adapt. Why success always starts with failure”, Tim Harford (2011: 37) starts with a quotation by H.R. McMaster commenting on the deployment and challenges facing the American forces in Iraq: “It’s so damn complex. If you ever think you have the solution to this, you’re wrong and you’re dangerous”.

I quite like the quotation – I think it can apply very easily to the Unisa context where we find it so easy to critique the decision to postpone the first assignment due to the postal strike, or the ‘out-of-stock’ items in Despatch, or the closing of the Unisa Call Centre. While there is also a danger of assuming problems are more complex than they really are or need to be...; our solutions to more-complex-than-presumed-problems often fall into the category that McMaster calls ‘wrong’ and ‘dangerous’...

In this second chapter, Harford (2011:40) uses the American forces’ deployment in Iraq as a case study of how solutions often “defies everything we want to believe about how any large organisation should deal with problems”. “In war, politics and business, we face complex problems, and adversaries who have their own plans. It is simply impossible to be right every time. As a Prussian general once put it, ‘No plan survives first contact with the enemy’. What matters is how quickly the leader is to adapt” (Harford 2011:42). [I will return to this point later].

Harford (2011:46) shows how the ideal structure of a large organisation is often impossible to adapt to the needs of the unforeseen and complex situations. The “ideal hierarchy” is proclaimed to consist of three elements namely “a ‘big-picture’ view produced by the refined analysis of all available information; a united small team pulling in the same direction; and a strict chain of command”. In reference to the performance of Johnson and McNamara in the Vietnam War, Harford (2011:46) states that McNamara and Johnson could “tick all the boxes [regarding the ideal hierarchical structure], yet produce catastrophic results”. Harford continues to explain: “The ‘big-picture’ information that could be summarised and analysed centrally wasn’t the information that turned out to matter. A loyal, unified team left no space for alternative perspectives. And a strict chain of command neatly suppressed bad news from further down the organisation before it reached Johnson” (2011:46).

The above was based on the wrong assumption that “enough computers and enough Harvard MBAs... could calculate the optimal strategy in war, far away from the front lines (Harford 2011:47). I found it quite disturbing to read Harford’s (2011:47) account of how Johnson and his advisers surrounded themselves with “yes-men” (sic) and where loyalty was not considered to be enough - merely “to ‘express disagreement’ was a threat” (Harford 2011:47).

The strategy to surround executive management in organisations with “yes-staff” defeats what we know about organisational learning where “a group of the very smartest agents isn’t as successful as a more diverse group of dumber agents” (Harford 2011:49). Harford (2011:49) emphasises the fact that on “hearing more ideas, better decisions emerge from a diverse group”. Later on in the chapter, Harford (2011:59) points to the interesting characteristic of General Petraeus who continuously sought critique and dissenting opinions.

Another interesting point Harford (2011:57) makes is the fact that staff on the ground were almost always in a better position to make decisions than the “from-the-top-enforced” strategy kilometres away. “It should be no surprise that soldiers on the front line were far quicker to seek out good advice, and far more eager to adapt, than their senior officers” (Harford 2011:58). While Harford (2011:69) does not completely discard “centralised quantitative analysis to solve a complex problem”, such analyses “remain incapable of capturing the tacit knowledge that really matters” (Harford 2011:71). In the business environment, “centralised organisation doesn’t work so well when confronted with a diverse, fast-moving range of markets” (Harford 2011:75). The US Army had to learn that decision-making had to be decentralised to personnel on the ground that have a more contextual understanding of the needs and challenges facing them. It is often junior officers on the front line, who on the spur-of-the-moment, have to make decisions; who win the war. In returning to analysing the character and style of McMaster, Harford (2011:79) states that McMaster’s approach emphasised “cultural understanding, local knowledge, urban environments, and the ‘enduring uncertainty of war’”.

I realise that there are some dangers to use literature produced outside the contexts of higher education and ODL to think and reflect on ODL practices at Unisa. I also found Harford’s (2011) use of the war in Iraq as case study to tire me emotionally – war as metaphor remains, for me personally, a very difficult and contested terrain. Having confessed my discomfort, I did find some interesting points in Harford’s (2011) analysis such as:

- Harford (2011:42) quotes a Prussian general who said “No plan survives first contact with the enemy”. How often do we encounter that the best planning based on careful analyses of previous years’ trends and founded on quantitative modelling falters when we suddenly face a postal strike, or where student numbers in a particular module suddenly increases and result in a dramatic increase in ‘out-of-stock’ items. When it was announced that the first assignment was postponed due to the postal strike, many staff commented on how it impacts on the second assignment, on admission to the examinations, etc.

I suspect that despite our careful planning and strategic plans, we are blinder than we think we are... And uncertainty is actually a much greater constant than predictability. The issue is how adaptable are we when facing the unforeseen and what are the impacts of our change of plans on staff and students?

- Harford's (2011:46) analysis of the perfect organisational hierarchy where management has (and sells) a big picture based on careful analysis and modelling of data, a small team of "yes-staff" and a strict chain of command; sent shivers down my spine. While Harford (2011) neither contest the role of analysis and quantitative modelling and planning, nor underestimate the impact of a group of dedicated men and women who oversees planning; he does emphasise the need for diversity and dissenting voices. How do we balance the 'big-picture' views from the top with the local, contextual tacit knowledges at the coalface of teaching and learning?
- One of the challenges facing such a huge organisation as Unisa is to have the wisdom to know which decisions to centralise and which decisions to leave to a range of stakeholders such as faculty, the regions and service departments. I know that opponents of central planning continuously contest the need for fixed dates where tutorial letters, examination papers, and study materials have to be submitted. Or maybe the issue is not the "fixed" nature of the dates, but the fact that "one-size-fits-all"?

But how do you arrange over 1,200 modules' tutorial letters, examination papers, and study material to allow for diversity and yet *not* compromise operational efficiency? I think Harford (2011) has a point when he states that staff members on the ground often are in a better position to make decisions about the immediate next steps than executive management. But when, and how? Which decisions should be left to staff? Under what circumstances? Do we trust our staff members' tacit knowledge to make optimal decisions and take responsibility for the decisions? Again the question must be raised: How do we balance the "big-picture" view of top management with the local and contextual knowledges of staff on the front lines?

- I think one of the enduring insights I got (so far) from Harford's (2011) book is the fact that we know less than we think we know and that the uncertainty and complexities we face require a culture of adaptation and learning. How adaptable can Unisa be in a 16-week tuition period? How adaptable should we be? What should be fixed and what should staff on the ground be able to adapt according to their tacit knowledge and contextual understandings? How do we support staff and students in the face of the need for adaptation when responding to new information that we did not have when we planned?
- Harford (2011) strongly emphasises the need to cultivate respect for diversity and dissenting opinions. I suspect that there is a fine balance between raising dissenting opinions when documents, policies and strategies are circulated for comments and raising a dissenting voice *after* extensive consultation.

3 THE *CONSUMER PROTECTION ACT*: AN IMPERATIVE FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL SERVICE DELIVERY, BY PROF VALIANT CLAPPER

Although consumers have traditionally had recourse through common law avenues in instances where their consumer rights have been violated, the new *Consumer Protection Act* (Act no. 68 of 2008; the *Act*) envisions and guarantees a dispensation of compensation heretofore not directly accessible to consumers of goods and services in South Africa. The *Act* creates and protects rights of consumers, and affords them the power to decide, within prescribed limits, the remedy for sub-standard and unsatisfactory services and products. An affected consumer now has recourse to the 3R's of consumer protection – *refund, replacement, or repair*.

An added and very important benefit is the fact that the *Act* is backed by a *Consumer Commission* and a *Consumer Tribunal*, both possessing the power to impose hefty penalties on organizations that fail to comply with the terms of the *Act*. This, in effect, means that the *Act* now specifically regulates the activities of suppliers of goods and services.

In these early stages of giving effect to high level consumer protectionism in South Africa, the *Act* will face a number of challenges, including a general lack of understanding its spirit and intent, its enforcement, and its possible abuse. Clearly what is required is rigorous advocacy and active lobbying by informed consumer activists. Currently the *Department of Trade and Industry* is tasked with playing the role of primary information disseminating body with respect to the *Act*.

In brief, the *Act* attempts to regulate the relationships between individual consumers and providers of goods and services. It addresses matters of product liability, privacy rights, business practices deemed to be unfair, fraud, misrepresentation, and other interactions between consumers and service providers. It, in essence, requires that service providers be fair, honest and reasonable in their dealings with consumers. These requirements imply that a supplier of goods and services has the obligation to create awareness among its employees of how their negligent interaction with clients and consumers may place the organization at risk, and of what behavioural changes are required to protect consumers of its products, goods and services – *i.e.*, the *Act* requires that organizations establish an effective risk management strategy; even if such a risk strategy is motivated by self preservation.

With respect to liability and accountability, the *Act* makes provision for rather severe penalties for suppliers of goods and services found to be in contravention of its directives and injunctions. For example, it determines that violators pay an administrative fine of up to ten percent of annual turnover or a fine of up to one million rand, whichever is the greater.

While the *Act* was initially meant to come into effect on 1 April 2011 (despite its 2008 date of promulgation), the effective date was postponed to 1 May 2011 in order to put administrative capacities in place and also to allow providers of goods and services to prepare their organizations for compliance. In most cases, however, it is likely that many organizations will have to undergo extensive cultural and behavioural transformations in order to serve its clients in line with the requirements of the *Act* and in compliance with good service delivery practice.

The *Act* and its implications for Unisa

It should be clear to even the superficial reader of the *Act* that tertiary institutions are also implicated under the definition of suppliers of goods and services. Students at tertiary institutions therefore constitute the primary consumers if the spirit and intent of the *Act* is applied.

At Unisa our pursuit of becoming the *African university in the service of humanity* determines that we support the letter and spirit of the *Act*; and that we support it beyond mere compliance informed by dread for the punitive measures it determines. The fact is that both the letter and the spirit of the *Act* are already anticipated and captured in our institutional values, our institutional service charter and our individual college service charters. In addition, we espouse the aspirations of the *Act* in our endorsement of the *UNGC* principles and our attempts at supporting and achieving the *Millennium Development Goals* as they apply to our contexts and various institutional pursuits. The spirit of the *Act*, however, requires of us to give careful consideration to our limitations in respect to our resources, capacities, and the like. High ideals in learner support and lofty ODL ambitions, while laudable in themselves, need to be tempered by acute awareness of our capacity challenges and resource limitations. To paraphrase a maxim in common usage, *we should not exhibit in our display window what we do not stock in our warehouses!* Unrealistic ideals and too ambitious promises can expose us to the full brunt of the *ACT*.

To a large extent we seem to have heretofore been able to weather the complaints of the users of our goods and services with a high measure of success. The vitriol and complaints that our disenchanted students publish at *hellopeter.com*, for example, have at times embarrassed us for a while, but have in the main left us only marginally scathed. In addition, the general lack of litigiousness that characterizes our students has been our salvation to date. However, the *Act* holds the potential to change this relatively comfortable dispensation; to go beyond the limited embarrassment of uncomfortable Internet exposure to real consumer action encouraged and supported by an act with teeth. No longer is liability for negligence or unrequited promises restricted to traditional customer service functions since the *Act* renders the entire supply chain throughout Unisa jointly and severally liable.

But fond adherence to our new *Charter on Transformation* should provide the impetus we need in order to deliver the services that our student population deserves. Particularly espousing the *11C's plus 1* should supply the fuel we need to find the most efficient ways of serving and protecting our customers.

4 IN MEMORY OF DR CHRIS LE ROUX (DCLD)



Dr Chris le Roux passed away on Saturday 6 August 2011.

Chris joined the Bureau for Learning Development (BLD) (now the DCLD) in 2002. It was an exciting time where all of us who joined the BLD were introduced to a culture of an extremely passionate department with often contesting views, approaches and paradigms regarding teaching and learning.

Chris never shied away from making a joke or contesting the department's seemingly preoccupation with paradigms and intellectual differences. He was the personification of a lifelong learner and passionate about the support we render our students. He made a huge impact in the lives of his colleagues, the lives of many students and the broader context of Unisa.

I salute Chris as a colleague and fellow-traveler on roads less travelled.

5 REGISTERING FOR THE UNISA 2011 TEACHING AND LEARNING FESTIVAL

With less than 25 days to go, the registration for the Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning Festival has opened and the spaces are filling up!

The registration for all the events will take place on myUnisa – by clicking on the following link - https://my.unisa.ac.za/portal/site/tl_festival

- On the left-hand side of this page click on 'Sign-up'
- On the Sign-up page you will find a list of sessions you can register for
- To register for a session click on the session title under the heading 'Meeting Title'
- On the session page, under the heading 'Meetings' you will find all the information relevant to that particular session, **please read the screen carefully.**

- Below the session detail, in the grey shaded area, on the right, under the heading 'Action', click on the 'Sign Up' button. After clicking the 'Sign-Up' button, confirmation text under the heading 'Your Status' will indicate that you have signed up. The booked session will now appear in the Schedule.
- To register for a second session click on the 'Back' button at the bottom left.
- After the Sign-up end date or if the session is booked to capacity you will **not** be able to book for that particular session any more.
- **Important:** There is also a '**Cancel**' option available. We urge you to please cancel your booking if you are not able to attend a session as space is limited.

There is also a very helpful podcast on how to register on myUnisa and for these sessions! See the full programme at the end of this Communiqué.

Don't miss out on this great opportunity!

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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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.