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1 UNISA 2011 FESTIVAL: KEYNOTE TWO – GILLY SALMON

The second keynote of the Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning Festival - *A new world: curriculum, pedagogy and technology in transition*, will be by Prof Gilly Salmon (University of Southern Queensland, Australia). The title of her keynote is - *Reviewing the Learning Odyssey: A long series of wanderings, filled with adventures and hardships*.

I asked her for a brief introduction to her keynote and Gilly responded as follows: In a world of incredible resources for informal learning, challenges to the long-held and loved role of Higher Education are occurring. The overarching key issue for universities over the coming years is to enable sustainability and transformation of learning experiences and their impact. Students are gradually driving the new opportunities. Change must be achieved by increasing participation, achieving 21st Century digital literacy for staff and students and new learning design. For Open and Distance Learning, there has been huge growth, the market is still growing. The key issues arise from (1) Evolving technology has great potential to provide transformation and meet aspirations such as mobility and access BUT to avoid rising costs, new operational, business and learning design and delivery models are needed; (2) Few distance learning providers are exploiting technology really well – learning technologies are disruptive and rarely favour existing providers and (3) ‘Conventional’ education is getting involved.

So the challenges are simple objectives, with complex dynamic solutions required: Widen access, increase quality, lower costs.
2 PARADOXES IN OUR THINKING ABOUT TUTORS

For many years (and maybe still) some of Unisa’s faculty regard tutors as less qualified than junior lecturers, less committed and somehow a second-hand option that students have in an ODL institution like Unisa. This is not unique to Unisa but a reality many tutors face in different distance education institutions.

Though not unique, there is evidence in several international ODL institutions that this is changing.

Many international ODL institutions currently regard tutors (and especially E-tutors) as on-par with and as part of faculty. Tutors add to students’ learning by sharing hands-on experiences in the world-of-work that most academics theorise about. Many tutors and E-tutors have the ability to bridge the outdated notion of the superficial gap between theory and practice. While tutors’ theoretical knowledge may have become outdated, they are celebrated and acknowledged for the unique contributions they can make to the learning (and lives) of students.

At Unisa, some of us do not only consider tutors and E-tutors to be sort of “not-as-good-as-permanent-faculty”, we also apply different standards when we appoint (and pay) them. To be paid, E-tutors must provide us with detailed lists of all the calls made to students and all the e-mails they sent to students. No evidence, no pay. If we apply the same to lecturers, how many lecturers will go home with much smaller salaries?

In defence of the current scenario where E-tutors have to produce these detailed claims; the question is raised that if they don’t produce the evidence, how do we know they have done what they were appointed to do? But is that not also the case with permanent faculty? Or do I miss something?

What is also fascinating about this apparent disjuncture between the assurance regimes of E-tutors and faculty is the fact that most faculty absolutely hates the performance management system’s requirement for evidence on KPAs. Most faculty consider the performance management system as part of the big Evil with the name of “Managerialism” or even worse, taking away “academic freedom”. And yet we are quite comfortable in requiring of our E-tutors to be micro-managed...

Is it not time that we seriously start to consider tutors and specifically E-tutors as not an add-on, or an after-thought but as an integral part of Unisa’s teaching and learning model? Is it not time that we respect the professionalism of tutors and E-tutors as we, ourselves, would like to be respected (and appreciated)? There may be evidence of some tutors or E-tutors that do not fulfil their contractual obligations, but the same may be tabled as being true for faculty?

Or am I wrong?
3 DISRUPTIVE INNOVATION

There are clear signs that, if Unisa wants to move into the digital and networked age, we will clearly have to re-think many of the standard (and accepted) practices regarding a number of issues at Unisa such as

- Venue-based summative assessment
- Sending students study material and encouraging them to collect the packages (and if there is a postal strike, postpone the first assignment...)
- The way we appoint and contract with tutors
- The way we think about office-bound faculty
- Group discussions and sending faculty all over South Africa
- Fixed (and limited) registration and examination periods
- Printing assignments that were submitted online and sending these back to students using snail mail

There are many more of these, but let me settle with these, for now.

The concept of “disruptive innovation” was coined by Clayton Christensen, who describes the concept as follows: “a process by which a product or service takes root initially in simple applications at the bottom of a market and then relentlessly moves ‘up market’, eventually displacing established competitors”. Examples of disruptive innovations are mobile phones, community colleges in the US context, retail medical clinics.

I don’t want to repeat what Christensen writes about disruptive innovation – there are a number of sites that describe and document the concept, processes and values inherent in disruptive innovation. Initially I was somewhat uncomfortable with the concept. Not that I am against innovation or for that matter, disruptive innovation. But I was not clear in my mind what the differences are between disruptive innovation and organisational sabotage. Staff responsible for the latter may see themselves as being innovators but they sabotage organisational efficiency to such an extent that the reputation of the organisation is at risk or that services to our client base is severely disrupted. In the exploration of disruptive innovation in the context of Unisa, we will have to be very clear about the distinction between institutional sabotage and disruptive innovation.

In my mind the main difference between sabotage and disruptive innovation lies in the fact that disruptive innovation does not initially take place on a grand and spectacular scale where failure will impact organisational efficiency. Disruptive innovation, if I understand Christensen correctly, starts in “simple applications at the bottom of a market” and only then move upwards.
When we think of and encourage disruptive innovation at Unisa, we will have to be very clear about the scale and ‘location’ of disruptive innovation. Those who think of grand and spectacular institution-wide projects as disruptive innovation, is in my humble opinion, wrong. Disruptive innovation starts small and almost in insignificant ways and only then grow and expand. Fast.

Which brings me to the point that John Kay raises in his book “Obliquity” (2010). He makes the point that often the fastest way to get to growth is in indirect ways. We are often obsessed with changing organisational processes and structures in big and spectacular ways because we don’t have the time to wait for a pilot or experiment to sort out the problems. The interesting thing about disruptive innovation is that it moves fast, once proven.

Finally, there are two questions that remain. The first question is to what extent Unisa as an organisation supports innovation and disruptive innovation? Or do our processes, procedures and bureaucracy dampen organisational innovation? Do we celebrate innovations that often disrupt (not sabotage) departmental and institutional ways of doing; or do we celebrate these innovators and learn from their successes? How do we reward disruptive innovators or do we reward those who always, obediently toe-the-line?

The next question and maybe the more difficult one is whether there are examples at Unisa of disruptive innovation? Was the closing of the dysfunctional Call Centre a disruptive innovation? When Klarissa Engelbrecht in the School of Computing started E-tutors (she called them Distance Learning Aides) – this was unheard of at Unisa. Now that E-tutors have become established at Unisa and we are mainstreaming the role E-tutors play, what will be the next disruptive innovation? Maybe appointing them as adjunct faculty with standardised contracts?

I suspect that Unisa has fallen into a trap of accepted processes, procedures and a list of what works and what doesn’t. It is time to look afresh at teaching and learning in a developing world context and embrace new ways of thinking about roles of faculty, responsibilities of students, assessment, tutors, office-bound faculty, venue-based examinations and so forth.

Any volunteers? Any suggestions on how to create safe and daring spaces where staff can experiment with new ways of doing things?
IODL SEARCHLIGHT WORKSHOP

IODL hosted the last Searchlight Research Writing Workshop for 2011. This exciting workshop took place on the 11th August 2011 at Unisa and was coordinated by Prof Ansie Minnaar of IODL. A total of 11 Unisa staff members attended the workshop.

The Searchlight Workshops have one major goal namely to provide advice and assistance that will allow workshop participants to create an infrastructure that will foster a desire to improve skills in research methods, enhance and sustain publication rates, and increase the external funds that UNISA secures for research.

Participants had an opportunity to present their work to the facilitators several times and got feedback for further improvement on their ODL research and article writing. The last workshop focussed mainly on peer review of articles before submission to the journal. Participants said that they enjoyed every minute of the workshop and that they gain by the input offered during the workshop. Comments from the Searchlight participants were:

“Useful resources, helpful and supportive feedback were provided”

“It was a useful project and thanks to Unisa management”

“I enjoyed the inspiring speakers including the international ODL researchers”

“It was a privilege to be chosen to take part in the searchlight”

“It was so good to have time to only focus on writing”

“I have learned a lot about ODL and research”

In conclusion, the Searchlight articles are nearing the final stage and will be published in a special edition of Progressio during 2012. The closing date for submissions from Searchlight participants for the special edition is 31 October 2011.

Watch the space for an exciting range of workshops for 2012!
5 LAUNCH OF THE CEMS E-TUTOR PILOT

On Saturday 6 August, the CEMS E-tutor pilot project was finally launched with the training of the E-tutors at a workshop held at Leriba Lodge. And what an amazing experience it was! Firstly, of the total of 71 E-tutors appointed, 68 E-tutors attended the workshop. This in itself was a major feat – signifying not only the commitment of these E-tutors to make a difference in the lives of Unisa students; but also signifying the commitment and hard work of the Steering committee.

Since September 2010 a group of Unisa staff met on a fortnightly basis to plan the launch of this project. We appointed 71 E-tutors on a ratio of 1:50 to students as an experiment – a decision taken based on the specific role of E-tutors in the context of Management and Cost Accounting on second-year level. Interestingly, a large number of these E-tutors are Unisa alumni – which may be an indication that Unisa may have overlooked our alumni as a valuable resource in our teaching and learning model.

The workshop on 6 August provided the E-tutors academic background of the module, introduced them to their different roles, administrative processes and procedures, and aimed at getting them excited about the prospect of being a Unisa E-Tutor!

Interestingly, of the total of 3,500 registered students 2,873 students registered for this module for the first time. There are 29 students are repeating the module for more than 6 times with the highest re-registration is 9 times. There are 34 students with disabilities in this module and these students were allocated to a specific E-tutor. There are only 18 students outside the continent of Africa, but 580 students outside the borders of South Africa but on the African continent. These students have specific needs and were allocated to specific E-tutors.

There are vital similarities between the three E-tutor (or whatever name these persons have in the different contexts) projects namely the CEMS E-tutor project, the Distance Learning Aides project in End-user computing and the Science Foundation Project. There are also however important and not so important differences. Some of these differences are essential to the nature of the college or discipline; while some of these differences can be sorted out to ensure a more standardised approach to offering E-tutors at Unisa.

The CEMS E-tutor project will also see the piloting of an academic-readiness diagnostic test, the student tracking system and the piloting of the student profiling instrument.

By the second semester of 2012, we aim to have standardised all E-tutor projects as far as possible. On 21 September there will be an institutional feedback on the CEMS E-tutor project with a progress report on the standardisation of E-tutoring at Unisa. More information on this event will follow closer to the time.
6 REGISTERING FOR THE UNISA 2011 TEACHING AND LEARNING FESTIVAL

With less than 16 days to go, the registration for the Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning Festival has opened and the spaces are filling up! There are already three workshops that are fully booked with a number of staff who has put their names on waiting lists.

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!

*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.

Drafted by Dr Paul Prinsloo
ODL Coordinator
Office of the Vice-Principal Academic: Teaching and Learning
Unisa
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+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.