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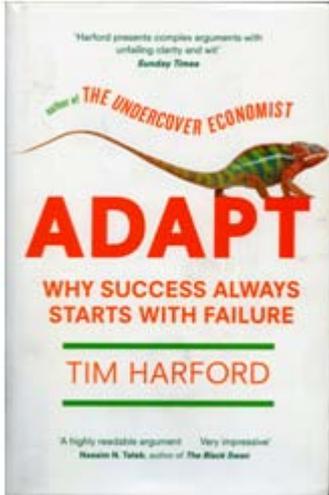
1 UNISA 2011 FESTIVAL: KEYNOTE THREE – ORMOND SIMPSON

The third keynote of the Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning Festival - *A new world: curriculum, pedagogy and technology in transition*, will be by Prof Ormond Simpson (*Visiting Fellow, University of London External Programme*). The title of Ormond's keynote address on Friday 2 September will be: "Retention in Distance Education: - are we failing our students?" Ormond has been a consultant, given presentations and run workshops on various aspects of distance learning in the West Indies, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, Korea, The Gambia, China, Colombia and the UK. He has given over 30 presentations in the last five years on distance learning in various institutions in the UK and elsewhere.



Ormond will also facilitate a number of workshops in the week of 5-9 September. Look out for his workshops on "A formula for student retention" and "Theories of student support – switching on students' learning motivation" (Monday 5 September); "Cost benefits of students support in distance education" and "Course Design for student retention" on Tuesday 6 September; "Technology, assessment and retention in distance learning" and "E-learning and student success – what does the evidence tell us?" on Wednesday 7 September; "Undertaking innovation and change in distance education" and "Ethical issues in distance learning" on Thursday 8 September and the final workshop on Friday 9 September with the title "Research and Evaluation in distance learning: what would you like to do?"

2 THE GOD COMPLEX AND FUQed QUESTIONS



I am returning this week to the latest book by Tim Harford “Adapt. Why success always starts with failure” (2011).

In an extremely interesting chapter (chapter 5), Tim Harford reflects on some of the difficult and super-complex problems humanity faces such as poverty and corruption. He states that it is extremely difficult to distinguish between “what is working and what is not” as what works in one context may not work at all in another context (2011:117). He shortly discusses the approach by Muhammad Yunus, the well-known scholar and entrepreneur who founded the micro-lending Grameen Bank in India. According to Harford (2011:116) what many people don’t know about Yunus is that his first attempt at micro-lending failed dismally. Harford (2011:116) therefore states: “Few people realise that the world’s most famous development success story began with trial and error”. [I will return to this later].

Harford (2011:117-118) ascribes Yunus’ success to the fact that “he was willing to experiment and to accept his early missteps”. Yunus himself describes his success to taking a “worm’s-eye view” (in Harford 2011:118). A worm’s-eye view is “about humbly adjusting to obstacles, changing course until the path to success is clear” (Harford 2011:118). [This is in stark contrast to our seeming obsession with the spectacular and the grand].

The second aspect in this chapter that I really found illuminating is Harford’s (2011:119-1127) discussion of how the often celebrated ‘successes’ of developmental aid are actually big failures. One example Harford discusses is the “PlayPump” where water is supplied to villages with the help of a roundabout on which children plays. Instead of the arduous process of using hand-pumps, the roundabouts pump water as children play on the roundabout. While this idea was celebrated as ingenious, the reality is that once the photographers and international visitors leave the sites where these roundabouts are installed, children leave the roundabout and women return to the hand-pumps. The verdict of the women is unanimous “the hand-pumps did the job much better” (Harford 2011:119). The motto of this story is that what may be celebrated by outsiders as an achievement, insiders know better...

Harford (2011: 121) then turns to the issue of experimenting in the medical sciences. Harford (2011:124) refers to a prisoner of war in Germany with the name of Cochrane who complained of doctors with a “God complex”. These doctors “didn’t need to carry out trials because they knew the correct course of treatment – even when some of their fellow doctors were issuing contradictory advice with equal confidence” (Harford 2011:124). Often those who petition for more hesitant approaches and solution are accused that they don’t care.

According to Harford (2011:126) those doctors and other professionals who were more hesitant and who preferred to experiment *before* rolling out treatment on a massive scale (in contrast to those with a “god complex”) were often accused that they do not care. The opposite is however true – it is exactly because they cared that they wanted to first experiment...

Which brings me to the last insight from this chapter by Harford (2011). Harford (2011:132) refers to the work of the econometrician Josh Angrist who spoke of “fundamentally unidentified questions” or FUQed questions. Such a question is one that “cannot be answered by an experiment – for instance, the effect of carbon dioxide on the world’s climate. We can measure and calculate, extrapolate from our existing knowledge, but one thing we can’t do is run a controlled experiment”. According to Harford (2011:132) there are some questions that cannot be solved by experimentation because the “knot is simply too tangled to be picked apart by randomised trials”.

Harford (2011:140-142) closes his chapter with exploring a very interesting statement by Owen Barder who states “We should not try to design a better world. We should make better feedback loops”. Personally I found this statement to be very provocative and I am still reflecting on it!

Reflecting on the meaning of Harford’s (2011) chapter for the implementation of ODL at Unisa the following comes to mind:

- No one wants to be remembered for an experiment that failed. Our obsession with ‘success’ as a performance measure prevents us from celebrating failures or even attempt something if we are not certain that it will be a success. We have become failure averse. With six monthly performance evaluations we can simply not afford to experiment and fail. Your file and line manager does not forget. In order for Unisa staff to be allowed and encouraged to experiment and fail, we will have to be much more tolerant of failure. If we don’t allow ourselves to fail, how can we expect to solve some of the complex issues Unisa is facing?
- With all our grand five and ten year plans and much-hyped turnaround strategies, we may do well to remember Yunus’ approach of the “worm’s-eye view” – of slowly progressing and adapting because we just don’t see everything. Although there may be many who claim to have a “superior” view from the top, or as Harford (2011) calls it – a “God complex”. Taking a “worms’-eye view and approach” may be slower, but proven to be much more successful. I sincerely don’t think that Harford (2011) discounts taking courageous steps forward. But maybe the courage lies not in the size or scale of the project, but facing the possibility that it may fail?

- Which brings me to the issue of FUQed questions in the context of Unisa. The number of variables in shaping and impacting on student success and retention is just of such complexity and magnitude that we cannot have controlled experiments. If we introduce E-tutors in one module and try to compare the pass rate with modules in which there are no E-tutors, we are faced with so many different contexts and student profiles that to make grand claims will be stupid. In the Unisa context, controlled experiments are impossible. So how will we know?
- I think one of the most important lessons I learned from this chapter in Harford's (2011) book is the final statement "We should not try to design a better world. We should make better feedback loops". We may never be able to solve the student retention and success issue at Unisa. We may never be able to solve the issue of out-of-stock materials or the impact of a postal strike, and so forth. But we can create and grow more feedback loops...

3 PUBLISHING ODL RESEARCH – NOT FOR THE FAINT-HEARTED

It is told that the composer Brahms wrote to a young composer who asked him for feedback on a composition the following: "There are many good and new things in your composition. The good things are not new and the new things are not good".

We all have had feedback on a submitted article which had the effect similar to that of a fly with flu being sucked into the trunk of an elephant with hay-fever. *It just cannot end well.* On receiving an article back over which you toiled for months just to be 'told' that you've missed such and such a point, that your literature review is incomplete, that you have completely underestimated the complexity of the issue, and so forth; is enough to make one try to commit a spectacular hara-kiri on the front lawn of the offices of the reviewers. You wear black for a week and by the end of the week your mood is blacker than the colour of a member of parliament's new BMW.

What makes publishing ODL research worse, is that it is often hard to find an accredited journal that would publish ODL research. Accredited journals dedicated to the advancement of disciplinary Research (with a capital 'R') sometimes frown upon articles which are interdisciplinary in nature and which deals with the scholarship of teaching and learning in a particular field. While there are signs that this is changing, the plot thickens...Finding a journal is one thing. Surviving the feedback is another. A total different ball game is when the editors of the journal consider it beyond themselves to inform you of the status of your submission. Often you have to beg them for feedback. Often you must trust that their somewhat glib answer of "your article is in the process" should bring you peace. But lo and behold, worse of all is to get a promise that your article will be considered for publication and then 13 months down the line, after you tried to set yourself alight in front of their offices with the world press taking pictures, you are informed, "Sorry, your article has not yet been sent for review. We are unfortunately full for this year. Please consider another journal". It is then that I consider wishing them a place in Dante's *Inferno* in the ninth circle reserved for those betrayed the trust of others.

4 7 OUT OF TEN STUDENTS HAVE NOT BOUGHT THE PRESCRIBED TEXT BOOK

By Molly Redden in The Chronicle, 23 August 2011 [read the full article on www.chronical.com]

For many students and their families, scraping together the money to pay for college is a big enough hurdle on its own. But a new survey has found that, once on a campus, many students are unwilling or unable to come up with more money to buy books—one of the very things that helps turn tuition dollars into academic success.

In the survey, released on Tuesday by the U.S. Public Interest Research Group, a non-profit consumer-advocacy organization, seven in 10 college students said they had not purchased a textbook at least once because they had found the price too high. Many more respondents said they had purchased a book whose price was driven up by common textbook-publishing practices, such as frequent new editions or bundling with other products.

"Students recognize that textbooks are essential to their education but have been pushed to the breaking point by skyrocketing costs," said Rich Williams, a higher-education advocate with the group, known as U.S. PIRG. "The alarming result of this survey underscores the urgent need for affordable solutions."

The survey, of 1,905 undergraduates on 13 campuses, including both large public universities and community colleges, does not measure the academic consequences for students who do not purchase textbooks, or predict which students are most likely to forgo buying books because of high prices. But 78 percent of those students who reported not buying a textbook said they expected to perform worse in that class, even though some borrowed or shared the textbook.

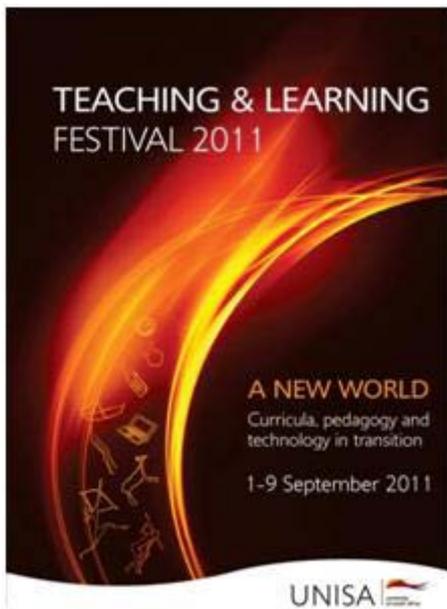
[Read the rest of the article [online](#)]

Reflection on situation at Unisa

Anecdotal evidence would suggest that the situation may be worse at Unisa given the socioeconomic context of many of our students. Students often discover only *after* registration what prescribed text books they need to buy in a particular module and these extra costs fall outside their initial budgets for their studies. Students who make use of loans and funding schemes must first get a quotation from a bookstore or online, submit the quotation to the scheme for approval before they get the funds to buy the prescribed books. This may take them well into three to four weeks of a semester. Many of our students try to share copies of previous editions of text books or make illegal photocopies of essential chapters. Some students rely on face-to-face tutorials or discussion classes to supplement their study materials because they just cannot afford text books.

Then there is the issue of workload. Often the amount of work required in working through study materials and prescribed text books far exceeds the notion of 120 notional hours per module.

6 EIGHT DAYS TO GO!



So far the response to the invitation to register for the Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning Festival was very interesting. Over half of the Unisa staff who registered up to yesterday for the events are from professional and support departments.

The support from academics has up to now been slow but we sincerely hope to see the number of academics increase substantially over this last week.

Let me state it clearly, just in case there is some misunderstanding: *Teaching and learning is primarily an academic or faculty issue.* Professional and support departments' roles are to support the core function of teaching.

We have invited some of the thought-leaders and cutting edge practitioners to share their experiences with us from 1-9 September. It is really the first time that such a number of high quality academics and practitioners visit Unisa at one time. Please do not miss this opportunity.

There are already a number of workshops that are fully booked with an increasing number of staff members who put their names on waiting lists. We will see how we can accommodate those on the 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.

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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.