ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 74, 31 AUGUST 2011

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1   UNISA 2011 FESTIVAL: SOME CHANGES TO THE PROGRAMME OF THE FIRST TWO DAYS
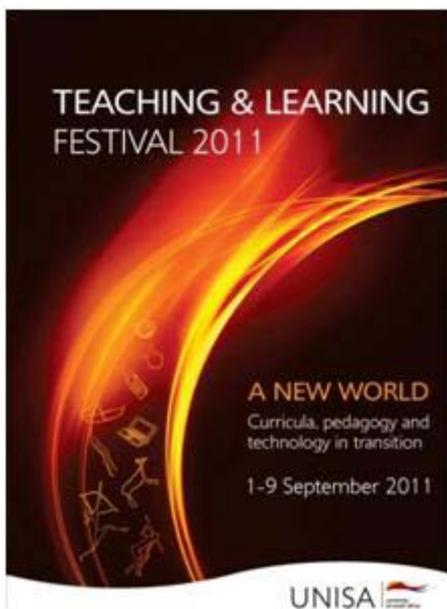
Please take note that due to unforeseen circumstances we had to adapt the programme of the first two days of the Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning Festival.

Although the times have only very slightly changed, we had to move the keynote by Catherine Ngugi on "OERs in Africa" to **Thursday afternoon, the 1st of September**. This will mean that we have a wonderfully full day on Thursday, and have time to dedicate some time on Friday morning to reflect as a group on what we have heard. The programme for Friday 2nd of September will now finish with a great lunch at 12:00.

The changed programme is available on the Festival website. Please note that your registration for the Festival is in no way affected by this change.

Actually, with us finishing earlier on Friday, more staff may be able to attend!

The response to the Festival has been phenomenal. By Tuesday afternoon, 30 August we had *very* few places left for the symposium in the Senate Hall (1-2 September) and **19** workshops are full with long waiting lists.

I would like to thank all of you who have registered and who will welcome and support our international, national and Unisa workshop facilitators!

2   UNISA 2011 FESTIVAL KEYNOTE: CATHERINE NGUGI

Catherine Ngugi (OER Africa) will deliver a keynote at the Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning Festival - *A new world: curriculum, pedagogy and technology in transition.* The title of her keynote on **Thursday 1 September** will be: "Open Education Resources (OER) in Africa".

Catherine is the Project Director of *OER Africa*, a *Saide* Initiative. Prior to holding this post, she established the African Virtual University's Research & Innovation Facility (RIF) in January 2005 and managed it until September 2007. During this period, the RIF hosted two OER projects and launched a Pan-African pilot study on the use of OER in African universities. Catherine holds an MA from the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS).

Catherine began her career in the private sector, working for a multinational manufacturer. In 1997, she relocated to Dakar, Senegal to work with CODESRIA (the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa), where she initiated and coordinated a grants management system and designed the CODESRIA Endowment Plan. Upon joining Oxfam GB, she conducted regional training sessions (Senegal, Mali, and Mauritania) in project sustainability across the organization's regional group and facilitated the funding by SIDA (Swedish International Donor Agency) of the Oxfam GB West Africa Regional Girls Education Program.

As Rockefeller Associate of the African Gender Institute, University of Cape Town, Catherine has worked as a consultant in higher education and the Arts to various international organizations headquartered in Nairobi. Her work has been published in *Kwani* and in the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*. She has also co-edited various publications including the eight country report on *Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and Higher Education in Africa* commissioned by the Centre for Educational Technology (CET) for the Educational Technology Initiative of the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa (PHEA).

Please take note that due to unforeseen circumstances, Catherine's keynote was moved from Friday 2 September to Thursday afternoon 1 September. This does not impact on the ending times of Thursday. We will however finish earlier on Friday.

The amended programme will be available on the web at

http://staff.unisa.ac.za/teachandlearn2011

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3 WHEN WE CANNOT AFFORD FAILURE
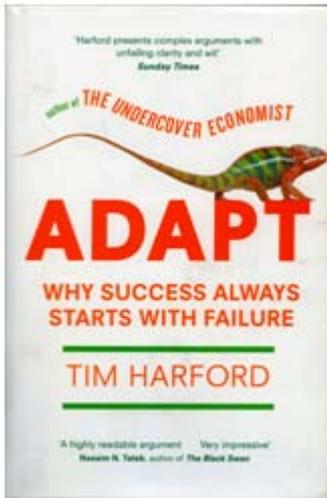
In the book "Adapt. Why success always starts with failure" by Tim Harford (2011), he provides a very strong argument in favour of creating organisational cultures where experimentation and failure are encouraged and celebrated.

But do we really want experiment at a nuclear plant and on oil rigs?

This is exactly the point that Harford (2011:181-220) makes in the penultimate chapter of his book. There are circumstances when "failure is unthinkable" (Harford 2011:180).

Harford (2011:181) starts this chapter by exploring the oil rig disaster caused when the oldest oil and gas rig in the North Sea named 'Piper Alpha' exploded on 6 July 1988. It is a chilling read to discover how one system failure led to another resulting in the loss of 167 lives. Harford (2011) then finds similarities between oil rig disasters, collapsing financial markets and nuclear plant failures. In all these cases "failure is unthinkable". There are situations when "we cannot allow ourselves the luxury of making mistakes, because mistakes have catastrophic consequences…" (Harford 2011:184).

Harford (2011:185) makes the important point that failure becomes "unthinkable" in systems that are both complex and 'tightly coupled' – "The defining characteristic of a tightly coupled process is that once it starts, it's difficult or impossible to stop; a domino-toppling display is not especially complex, but it is tightly coupled".

In 'tightly coupled' systems such as oil rigs, nuclear plants and financial systems, one small error can "spiral out of control quickly". Harford (2011:185) comments that in complex and tightly coupled systems there are "many different ways for things to go wrong. Tight coupling means the unintended consequences proliferate so quickly that it is impossible to adapt to the failure or to try something different." There is just no time to react…

The irony is, as Harford (2011:186-187) points out, that in facing complex and tightly coupled systems, "the natural temptation" is thus to layer more and more safety measures on an already tight and complex system, therefore creating numerous *new* ways for things to go wrong. Harford (2011:192) makes a very valuable point by suggesting that the need is not so much for safety measures but for "better indicators of what was happening". Often the "noise" created when complex and tightly coupled systems start to implode is so much, that it simply impossible to "pick out the essential information from the blizzard of … noise" (Harford 2011:194).

Harford (2011:201) then discusses dominoes and how domino enthusiasts and professional domino topplers "now use safety gates" removed at the last moment to ensure that if there is an unforeseen incident (like someone sneezing or a cat running through the room), that the whole system does not collapse.

According to Harford (2011:208) it is also important to distinguish between "slips, mistakes and violations". 'Slips' are the most innocent ones – "when through clumsiness or lack of attention you do simply didn't mean to do". 'Violations' on the other hand is when someone *deliberately* chooses to do the wrong thing. Harford (2011:208) calls 'mistakes' the "most insidious" of all three categories. "Mistakes are things you do on purpose, but with unintended consequences, because your mental model of the world is wrong" (Harford 2011:208).

In the final part of this chapter, Harford (2011:217-219) makes a number of points regarding complex and tightly coupled systems after discussing the Deepwater Horizon oil spill disaster in 2010:

1. The first lesson is that safety systems often fail.
2. The second lesson is that latent errors can be deadly.
3. The third lesson is that had whistleblowers felt able to speak up, the accident might have been prevented.
4. Fourth, the rig system was too tightly coupled. One failure tended to compound another.
5. Fifthly, contingency plans would have helped.
6. The final lesson is that of 'normal accident' theory: accidents will happen, and we must be prepared for the consequences.

Which brings me to Unisa…

The following questions come to mind:

1. While I was very keen in my support of Harford's (2011) proposal that organisations like Unisa should encourage experimentation and celebrate the learning that occurs when we encounter failure; I agree with his proposal that there are times when "failure is unthinkable" and where experimentation would be reckless and unethical.

   When, in the context of Unisa, is "failure unthinkable"?
   - When students' registrations are not processed in time or where their registrations "get lost"
   - When student assignments get lost or mixed up
   - When books are prescribed which are not readily available

- When we have one printer in Production dedicated to print out-of-stock items but it is the same printer dedicated for tutorial letters which are unfortunately late. Then we postpone the first assignment because students did not get their study materials and then we postpone the second assignment because students complain they did not have enough time to do the second assignment because the prescribed text book became unavailable. Then we have to move the examination date because our examination venues cannot handle all the students who we gave admission to the examination. Then the students complain about the new dates so we grant them supplementary examinations.

   I suggest that all Unisa departments accept as motto for a year "Failure is unthinkable". Full stop.

2. To what extent is Unisa a complex and tightly coupled system? While there may be some functions at Unisa that are complex but not necessarily tightly coupled with other core functions; there may be simple functions which are tightly coupled with other core functions and when they fail, it has a domino effect.

   Unisa's reliance on printed study materials with a huge product qualification mix makes us very vulnerable. Add to that the volatile context of postal strikes, unforeseen growth in student numbers, networks that go down or systems that cannot handle the increased student numbers and we have a recipe for a disaster.

   As Harford (2011) indicates, the need is not for more safety measures (or for that matter – quality assurance…). These often just further clutter the system. There is a need for real-time information that is trustworthy and actionable. But then as Harford (2011) indicated, if a system implodes, the noise is so much that it is difficult to discern essential information. So how will we ensure that essential information reach the right people at the right time?

   It would seem as if a more effective approach would be to decouple as many as possible of Unisa's processes from one another to prevent a domino effect if one system fails.

3. While more safety measures do not salvage the implosion of systems and processes; we can build in *safety gates* like those built-in safety gates which domino topplers design and use. This will prevent that if there is an implosion in one section, that other sections are not affected. This will necessitate a careful and critical analysis of Unisa's processes and systems.

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4. One of my own personal 'aha' moments in reading Harford's (2011) book was his statement "Mistakes are things you do on purpose, but with unintended consequences, because your mental model of the world is wrong" (Harford 2011:208).

   This is a crucial point. Which things do we do on purpose, with unintended consequences, because our "mental model of the world is wrong". Ouch. It is easy to immediately think of how other departments' mental models of teaching and learning at Unisa are wrong. But what about our own mental model?

   Maybe it is time to reflect as an institution on our mental models regarding teaching and learning at Unisa. There are just too many mistakes. Slips can be forgiven. Violations can be addressed. Mistakes are the most "insidious" of them all…

4   THE IMPORTANCE OF MYLIFE E-MAIL ACCOUNTS…

Maybe a good example of a wrong mental model is our belief that because we provide students with a MyLife e-mail account, they should use it. Wrong.

In the E-Tutor pilot project in Management and Cost Accounting, E-tutors make contact with students phoning them and sending them e-mails to students' MyLife e-mail accounts. Students respond very positively to the telephone calls but the response rate to e-mails sent to students' MyLife e-mail accounts is dismal.

If Unisa wants to use students' MyLife e-mail accounts as basis *for all official communication*, as only way in which assignments will be sent back to students, etc – we will seriously and urgently have to make students aware of the importance of accessing and maintaining their e-mail accounts.

Students (like many staff members) have more than one e-mail account and do not necessarily maintain all of them. Often e-mail accounts are changed more frequently than one may suspect. Students (like staff) are also notorious for not updating their personal information as regularly as they should.

Therefore it makes sense (at least to me…) that Unisa provides students with a standard for-life e-mail account that serves as the basis for all e-mail communication to students. But somehow the penny does not drop. What can we do more to emphasise the importance of the MyLife e-mail account to students? How can we assist them to take this seriously? How can we assist them to forward all their Unisa mails to their preferred accounts and maintain and update their personal information?

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5   FORGETTING THOSE WHO ARE DIFFERENTLY ABLED

There is one element of being an open distance learning (ODL) that we seem to forget... And that is that we should also be open to creating equal opportunities for students living and learning with disabilities.

In many of our modules students living and learning with disability form a significant (and easily forgotten) part. For example, in a module like Management and Cost Accounting on second year level, there are 34 students among the total count of over 4,000 students. Although these students constitute a small minority we dare not forget the amazing persistence and courage these students have shown in registering in an ODL institution. Among those students are 4 students who are paraplegic, 1 blind student and 2 who have reading disabilities, 2 with epilepsy, 5 with muscular and neurological diseases, and 3 with diabetes, to mention but a few.

How do they cope? How do they experience studying through Unisa? Do we care?

During the Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning Festival, we specifically also focus on students living and learning with disability. Not only will all the keynotes be translated by Sign Language Interpreters, but there are three amazing workshops which focus specifically on how incorporate the needs of learners with disabilities when we design and deliver learning experiences.

On **Monday, 5 September** (13:30-15:30) **Dr Siva Moodley** is facilitating a workshop with the title: "Integrating disability into the core curriculum". On **Tuesday 6 September** (09:00-12:00) **Vicki Goodwin**, a dyslexia specialist from the United Kingdom, is hosting a workshop on "Struggling talent – issues in reading, writing, memory and organisation – for dyslexic students in ODL". Also on **Tuesday 6 September**, Vicki will facilitate a workshop "Reducing barriers to learning – the production of written and online materials for students with dyslexia" from 11:00-12:00.

Don't miss the workshop by **Fanie du Toit** on **Wednesday 7 September** from 13:30-15:30 on "The impact of hearing loss on the accessibility of buildings and services". We can promise you that you will not leave the workshop untouched!

On **Thursday 8 September**, **Deenadaylan Moodley** will host a workshop from 13:30-15:30 on "Using technology to enhance access to teaching and learning for students with disabilities".

For more information and the programme, visit the website at: http://staff.unisa.ac.za/teachandlearn2011

Click on the registration online icon on the website to register.

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.