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1 UNISA 2011 FESTIVAL: REKINDLE THE LOVE



At the closing of the symposium part of the Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning Festival, Gibson Chauke, one of Unisa's Young Academics said that the Festival was about 'love' – love for our students, love for what we teach and how we teach it, and love for the possible impact we could have on the lives of thousands of students, who would have been excluded from higher education if it was not for Unisa.

His closing statement touched a somewhat raw nerve. For many academics and professional staff, it was an uneasy reminder of the reason why they originally joined Unisa – namely the belief that you could make a difference in the lives of students, whether through teaching or for making teaching and learning possible.

Sadly, for many of us, the love we had when we joined Unisa, was lost in nexus of the constant battle of submitting tutorial letters, study materials, marking assignments, answering student queries, sorting out and addressing student concerns and facing institutional inefficiencies.

Like couples that are married or involved for many years, the love that we once had when we joined Unisa, was lost and became stale like the smell of an unopened cupboard.

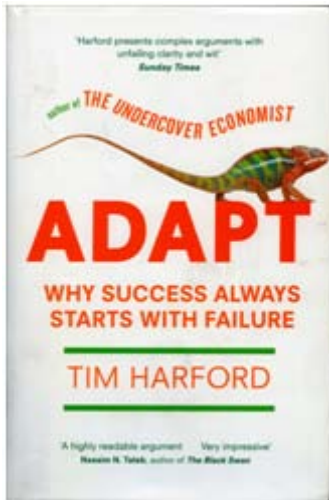
Gibson suggested that as couples who find themselves in this unfortunate situation of longing for the love they once had often take a vacation to rekindle that love. For many the Festival fulfilled the role of that 'vacation' – where we all, academics and professional staff – could take a break and rekindle our love.

2 REFLECTIONS AND SENSE-MAKING FROM UNISA 2011 TEACHING AND LEARNING FESTIVAL

The following are personal reflections on what I heard and experienced so far from the Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning Festival (with three days to go)...

- It can no longer be business as usual for teaching and learning at Unisa. More than ever before the message repeatedly came through – we can no longer teach the way we have taught since the early 20th century. We are in the second decade of the 21st century and it is unethical, irresponsible and ineffective to teach in ways as if nothing has changed. There were fundamental shifts not only in pedagogy but also in how knowledge is created and shared. Knowledge has become less hierarchical and more distributed. The roles of educators and students have changed. More than ever before do I have a sense of urgency that Unisa should rethink our assumptions about knowledge and learning.
- While no one negates the fact that *some* of our students have limited or no connectivity – our responsibility is to prepare students for a networked and fast-changing world. I have realised that we absolutely have to find ways to increase students (and faculty's...) preparedness for a digital age. We have to find ways to lower the cost of connectivity for staff and our students. *We have no choice*. It is as if the 'digital divide' is holding us in its captive gaze and we are hypnotised and immobilised. Our mantra has become “we can not” and “they don't have”. What about a mantra “we should”? We *must* find ways.
- The need for effective and integrated systems and processes has never been greater. We can simply no longer afford to have inefficient, non-integrated and unresponsive systems. Failure is simply not an option.
- For many years faculty assumed the main role in teaching. Distributed learning models and networks make it increasingly impossible for faculty to independently develop curricula, implement these curricula and provide academic, affective and appropriate student support to students. We can no longer ignore the need to urgently relook the role of our tutors and especially the potential of E-tutors.
- If 20% of students drop-out before the first assignment, there is enough evidence that proactive interventions from the side of the institution can make a huge difference. For many years we hid behind the fictive façade of the “autonomous” learner who must study independently. Hopefully by the time they graduate they should be more autonomous than they were when they registered for the first time. But surely the majority of them is anything but “autonomous” when they enroll for their first modules. Do we care?

3 ADAPTING AS WE GO ALONG



Harford (2011) in his book “Adapt. Why success always starts with failure” describes the adaptive organisation in very clear terms. He starts his overview of what an adaptive organisation looks like with a quote by Aza Raskin, a designer at Firefox who says “Your first try will be wrong. Budget and design for it” (Harford 2011:221).

Harford (2011:221-222) uses the research done by Endler on how guppies survive in different contexts as starting point for exploring adaptation in organisations. Endler introduced guppies in a variety of pools with different pool linings but the constant element was the introduction of dangerous pike to these pools. Within ten generations (14 months), the guppy populations adapted to their environments to ensure survival. The adaptation of the guppies was not only incredibly fast, but it was also very context-specific. What worked in one context would not have ensured survival in another context. The adaptation was furthermore decentralised – “no guppy planned the response. And it was driven by failure: some guppies were eaten, while others went on to produce future generations of well-adapted baby guppies” (Harford 2011:222).

Harford (2011:222) then states: “Adapting is not necessarily something we do. It may well be something that is *done to us*”.

While guppies’ adaptation emerged from generation to generation, humans don’t have to wait for a new generation before we can adapt. Humans have the ability “to adapt as we go along” (Harford 2011:223). Harford (2011:224) then proposes three essential steps to mainstream a culture of adaptation in an organisation:

- “Try new things, expecting that some will fail”
- “Make failure survivable: create safe spaces for failure or move forward in small steps. ... the trick here is finding the right scale in which to experiment: significant to make a difference, but not such a gamble that you’re ruined if it fails”
- “Make sure that you know when you’ve failed, or you will never learn”.

These steps, if they become in the lives of staff and in the culture of the organisation, may prevent organisations from becoming a dinosaur” (Harford 2011:239).

Thinking about teaching and learning at Unisa, in terms of what Harford (2011) proposes, the following comes to mind:

- Has Unisa become a dinosaur, destined to become obsolete and irrelevant because of our inability and unwillingness to adapt? Do we still believe that what systems that were effective 20 years ago can address the needs of the digital age with a much larger student body? How have our curricula responded?

Will the only thing that keeps Unisa from becoming distinct be the fact that we are the only dedicated distance education institution and for many students the only possibility to enrol in higher education?

- It was a recurring theme in Harford's (2011) book – the acceptance of failure as normal and healthy (unless you are working in a nuclear plant or oil rig). While Harford (2011) has emphasised that there may be some organisations and/or sections in organisations where “failure is not an option”; the general proposition is that we should learn to live with failure and embrace it as an opportunity to learn.
- The important thing that Harford (2011:224) brings to the fore is that we must make failure survivable – for the organisation, for staff and students. Let me pause for a moment. In many instances failure in the context of Unisa is certainly not survivable. Many students' learning journeys are severely compromised through individual and organisational lapses, inefficiencies, not caring and blaming the next provider or the previous provider in the value network. It is simply not acceptable. We need to experiment, but not with the lives and futures of our staff and students. This is simply unethical and irresponsible.
- We need to find or create spaces where we can experiment. We need to find the right scale for our experiments – “significant to make a difference, but not such a gamble that you're ruined if it fails”
- Often we don't know that we have failed. Or maybe we don't care to know. Or we hide our failures from scrutiny and therefore this prevents learning.

Obsolescence is real. If only we care enough to listen.

4 ANOTHER THREE DAYS...



The first Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning Festival is in its final stages with only three days to go.

And what a Festival it was! There was a lot of critique that somehow faculty could not relate to the idea of a 'festival'. Was it not 'academic' enough? Could we not relate to the notion of “teaching and learning”? Or was our faculty so swamped in preparing study materials, setting examination papers, doing research that we simply did not have the time to take a break and come and listen to some of the best scholars the world as to offer?

Surprisingly (and increasingly frustratingly) many faculty claimed not to have 'known'. At the last Senate meeting the allegation was made that the festival was not marketed or the

idea not communicated enough.

I did not respond during the Senate meeting. I was overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness that despite INTCOMS, a weekly ODL Communiqué and several e-mail invitations, the allegation that “we did not know” was not met with gasps of disbelief. Instead, many faculty meekly agreed.

Despite this, the feedback from those faculty and professional staff that could relate with “teaching and learning” and who could identify with a “festival” is overwhelmingly positive.

Below is a picture of some of the participants in the Festival.



5 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.