



ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 76, 14 SEPTEMBER 2011

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1 ILLITERATE GRADUATES

During the recent *Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning Festival*, George Siemens defined literacy as follows: “The ability to take part in the dominant discourse of the day”. While George referred specifically to the way technology shapes us, I suspect the notion of ‘dominant discourses of the day’ is much wider. Which made me think...

We really want our graduates to be on par with graduates from across the world, while having a critical sense of their locations on the African continent and in an increasingly networked world. We aspire that our graduates should not only fit into professional and corporate worlds, but actually be leaders in these worlds. And yet we are quite comfortable in producing graduates that cannot take part in the dominant discourses of the day. Most of our graduates may be found wanting and illiterate.

Don’t tell me about the quality of students’ secondary school education and how underprepared our students are when registering through Unisa. Let us for the moment focus on how underprepared we send them off into the world where they will compete with the best the world has to offer. When they apply for a job, their prospective employer will not ask whether they had a computer at home. Employers will not ask how frequently students had access to the Internet. Employers are looking for graduates who can compete and be effective in a networked and digital age. Even more important is the fact that *society* needs graduates who critiques and shapes the discourses that shape our lives. And engagement means more than toy-toying...

Maybe it is time to redefine the notion of the “digital divide” in reference to students’ access to technologies. Maybe we should redefine and broaden the notion of “divide” as referring to the gap between what Unisa produces and the need for graduates that can take part, critique and shape the dominant discourses of a digital, un-flat world. Once we agree that it is irresponsible, uncaring and perpetuating the injustices of the past by not preparing graduates to take part in, contest and shape the dominant discourses of a digital and unflat age, then the ‘why’ is not the question anymore; but the ‘how’.

2 FINAL REFLECTIONS ON THE UNISA 2011 TEACHING AND LEARNING FESTIVAL



Over the weekend I encountered several authors who point to the fact that the quality of our decisions depend on the quality of our *questions*, not our answers. A poor question can still have a good answer...

Thinking back on the recent Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning Festival, the following questions come to mind... I don't claim they are necessarily good, but at least it is a start.

- *What is Unisa's value proposition?* When Unisa was founded in 1873, our value proposition was the fact that we were an examining body for Oxford and Cambridge curricula and examinations. In 1946 Unisa started to develop curricula and offer programmes. Since 1946 Unisa provided access for many students who would otherwise have been excluded

from higher education due to race, school leaving qualification, cost, or location. Unisa's study materials were sought after and even guides that were thrown away were harvested from refuse sites.

But times have changed. The amount of information and open educational resources have increased exponentially. The quality of many of these open resources is of such a nature that Unisa can simply not compete. Yes, we should be aware that all content (whether open or not) has a hidden curriculum (or ideological basis). But we should also acknowledge that even when we re-appropriate these contents and 'Africanise' them, we do not make them neutral but rather change their ideological lense through which the world is presented to our students. Which is just as ideological as the previous lense...

What do we add to the learning experience? George Siemens stated unequivocally that higher education's value proposition is not necessarily its content, but our caring, our scaffolding, our assistance in wayfinding and sensemaking, our support and encouragement. If he is correct (and I have a strong suspicion that he is), we need to seriously reconsider our assumptions about our content, our pedagogies, the scaffolding we provide and the ways we prepare our students for an unflat world. If we do not, we may find ourselves obsolete. A dinosaur.

- Ormond Simpson shared with us (amongst other things) three ‘types’ of staff in higher education – the ‘Darwinistas’, the ‘Fatalistas’ and the ‘Retentioneers’. The ‘Darwinistas’ see student success as a matter of the ‘survival of the fittest’. Those students who don’t survive higher education simply do not belong in higher education. Finish and klaar. The ‘Fatalistas’ are a bit different by claiming that there is actually very little that we can do to increase student success. If students are underprepared for higher education when they register, there is not much we can do.

Then there are the ‘Retentioneers’ who believe that we can and should act to increase student success and retention.

Unisa has a fair share of all three of these types of staff. While the ‘Darwinistas’ and the ‘Fatalistas’ are most probably the most visible in some institutional forums, there are an increasing number of ‘Retentioneers’ claiming equal if not more prominent footing.

So the question that arises, is the following: *How can we support those Retentioneers among faculty who are often in the minority or who often face dysfunctional and non-integrated systems and very critical and cynical senior staff?*

- According to George Siemens the amount of data that we (and our students) face on a daily basis exceeds the capacity of the human mind and our human social systems for making sense of it all. He also mooted the notion that the wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.

This made me think of the amount of information we provide students in the midst of the data ‘noise’ they face from being increasingly connected. We try to assist students with providing them with even *more* information, more tutorial letters, adding DVDs and discussion classes, and so forth. *Is that the right way to go? Are we not adding to the ‘noise’? Should we not lessen the ‘noise’ by more careful selection and structuring of learning?*

- Not only has the amount of data and information flows increased, the structure of data we encounter on a daily basis has changed. In the past data was hierarchical and structured while in the present day data has become distributed, unstructured, increasingly fragmented, contested and complex. We all have an increasing need for developing coherent frameworks to find our ways in and through these data flows. Such frameworks orientate us to find out how data is connected, structured and related.

Siemens again emphasised that our value proposition is not delivering content, but in what he calls “curatorial teaching” where educators amplify, curate, help students to find their ways and find sense, aggregate, filter, model and provide a persistent caring presence. For so many years we have seen the main role of academics to produce *content*. *Are we ready for new roles as curators of connections?*

- The team from Leicester University provided excellent examples of how student success, satisfaction and retention could be improved through *low cost, high impact* strategies and interventions. They provided various examples of how better scaffolded courses with podcasts and persistent presence by adjunct faculty can really make a huge difference in the lives of students (and in the lives of staff).

Are we ready to get the basics right and explore low cost but high impact solutions or are we sold out to the costly, glamorous and large scale interventions?

- More than the issues raised above, the Festival left me with the impression that the time has come to leapfrog into redefining teaching and learning at Unisa. And don’t get me wrong – it is not all about the latest technologies or applications. To the contrary. *But are we courageous enough to face our demons and question some historical assumptions and views about the roles of faculty, tutors and students?*

3 JUST KEEP WALKING

This ODL Communiqué will be my last Communiqué. I would have loved to reach a hundred communiqués, but ODL has become institutionalised to a great extent and my role as ODL Coordinator will become superfluous by the end of 2011. I will furthermore be leaving on 21 September for the United Kingdom for the last part of my International Fellowship from the Open University Business School. By the time I return on 17 October examinations would have started and the academic year would be slowly come to a halt. For the remaining period till December I will attempt to integrate the different proposals into a conceptual and holistic ODL framework.

Allow me therefore to share the following reflections with apologies to a specific brand of whiskey that uses the line of “keep walking” as motto.

It often happens that you are at the right place at the right moment. Other times you happen to be at the right place, but at the wrong moment; or at the wrong place at the right moment. Most of these moments in one’s life are not within one’s locus of control. Life happens – and it is impossible to predict and plan to the finest detail of where one wants to be at a specific juncture in one’s life.

And then there are the issue of 'choices'. I have made some (really) stupid choices in my life - choices with consequences that I live with daily. I have also made some good choices – for which I am very grateful. And then I made some *fortunate* choices at moments in my life when I did not have all the detail at hand and these choices worked out well. And then there were the choices made *for* me. These are choices that left me disappointed at times, angry, disillusioned, but looking back at these choices that were made for me; I accept them as part of the unfolding tapestry of my life – often very gratefully.

Looking back at my journey as ODL Coordinator and as author of these ODL Communiqués, I am extremely grateful that it would seem as if I had been at the right place, at a specific time in Unisa's journey of discovering what it means to become an ODL institution. Seventy-six ODL Communiqués ago I did not realise how fortunate I was.

It is only now, looking back on almost two years of my life as ODL Coordinator, do I realise how privileged I was. I was allowed to have worked with some of the greatest minds the Unisa community has to offer. I had to negotiate (often unsuccessfully) between the minefields of personal interests, institutional politics and hierarchies as well as the claims and counter-claims of very committed and critical colleagues.

Somehow I managed to keep walking.

Often I really did not know in which direction to walk, but I fumbled and found my way in the dark and somehow got through it. Often colleagues or circumstances, or a book I have read, nudged in a direction – and I found my way.

With the ODL implementation project coming to a close with most of the ODL Implementation Plan's objectives achieved and with the appointment of Prof Oupa Mashile as the Executive Director: Teaching and Facilitation of Learning – it is time for me to move on. For the first time in Unisa's history, we have an Executive Director: Teaching and Learning. Prof Mashile will lead Unisa's teaching and learning into the second decade of the 21st century. Unisa is in good hands.

Assessing the present moment in my professional life is impossible. There are just too many variables that are outside my locus of control. I will only be able to look back in a number of months' time to know how the present moment unfolded. In this nexus between the past and an unknown future, I embrace, like so many times in my life the motto: *just keep walking*.

For those of you who would like to continue to read my reflections on teaching and learning in open, distance and e-learning contexts, you are welcome to read my blog on the following link: <http://opendistanceteachingandlearning.wordpress.com/>. Through blogging in the (scary) domain of the open Internet I hope to contribute to the broader discourses on teaching and learning in ODL contexts.

I would like to thank everyone who met me in the corridors and who (often) protested or at times expressed appreciation for these communiqués. As I found my feet in sharing reflections and personal insights, the acceptance, critique and support of many Unisa colleagues really made sharing these communiqués one of the highlights of my journey.

4 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.

In collaboration with the Unisa Library, I will start the process of structuring the content on the Unisa Institutional Repository on my return from the UK to provide easier access to all the documents produced during this period.

Drafted by Dr Paul Prinsloo

ODL Coordinator

Office of the Vice-Principal Academic: Teaching and Learning

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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.