

Looking at the design and control of learning opportunities from the learners' perspective

Milly Daweti
Bureau for Learning Development, Unisa

Progressio 2003 25(1):1-10

ABSTRACT

Higher education is being called upon to create learning opportunities that meet new national priorities and simultaneously ensure quality and success. For pedagogical and political reasons, it is desirable that learning programmes reflect openness and flexibility. However, the assumptions, purposes, and frameworks which shape "open learning" are seldom made explicit. This paper highlights the need to be aware of those areas in which there is a mismatch between our intentions and expectations on the one hand, and students' experiences of the design and delivery processes on the other. Findings from a case study of distance learners at one South African university are outlined. Another aspect that is examined is the need for acknowledgment of our accountability and for ongoing critical review of our conceptions of learning and teaching, regardless of the mode of delivery.

INTRODUCTION

The Higher Education Act of 1997 proclaims that higher education in South Africa needs to be restructured and diversified with the purpose of meeting the learning needs and aspirations of individuals. Higher education is seen as a key allocator of life chances and an important vehicle for achieving equity in the distribution of opportunity and achievement among South African citizens. Guiding this transformation process are fundamental principles such as equity and redress, development, quality, and academic freedom. New educational goals include expansion of access, diversification of the body of learners, and enhanced quality through distance education and resource-based learning. The Act states the following:

... contact and distance education institutions will be encouraged to provide effective and flexible learning environments on a continuum of educational provision, in which educators will be able to select from an increasing range of educational methods and technologies those that are most appropriate to the context within which they operate. This development, together with a regional network of learning centres, will not only broaden access, but also facilitate and enhance quality in education, especially in rural areas and less well-endowed urban institutions (White Paper 3 1997:18).

Thus learner diversity, social equity and new career orientations are at the heart of this mission of transformation. In response, many institutions are supplementing their face-to-face tuition with a distance learning component which gives learners the option of studying at their own pace and place, and according to their personal requirements. Complex issues and processes are involved, though. This paper discusses some perspectives on the open approach to education provision and the lessons to be learnt from a small-scale survey of student experiences.

THE CONTROL-AUTONOMY DICHOTOMY IN OPEN LEARNING

Traditional distance education is characterised by "closed" curricula and separation between teacher and learner and between learner and knowledge. However, student isolation is not confined to distance education. Even where teachers and learners meet face to face in a lecture hall, pedagogic and cultural distances persist. This is due to factors such as the academic discourse of the discipline, the absence of links across disciplines, and textbook propagation of a single model of understanding (Bourdieu, Passeron, & De Saint Martin 1994:8-10; Peters 1998:39).

Rumble (1989:30) sees the adoption of an open approach to teaching and learning as an effective way of addressing these discrepancies. Open learning fosters dialogue, reflecting the professional and personal autonomy of students and the right of students to assume responsibility for their own studies, rather than belong to an educational institution which assumes responsibility for them. Flexibility and openness in the objectives and character of the educational process mean that there is greater choice not only in terms of physical access - time, place and pace - but also in terms of psychological access. The latter has to do with

- the appeal of the curriculum and its delivery
- clarity about the intended outcomes of the curriculum
- choice of learning and assessment methods
- quality of support for the student (Rumble 1989:29-30; Lewis 1998:24-25)

However, the meanings attached to these broad statements vary widely from institution to institution and are seldom made explicit. Furthermore, given the political nature of education and the fact that learning is regulated by our frames of reference, interests and purposes, the discourse of "open learning" is neither open nor neutral. As McLaren and da Silva (1993:61, 100) point out, the language of teaching too often serves as a coercive text by restricting or shaping the way in which both teachers and students make sense of their experiences. In addition, Marsh, Richards and Smith (2001:381-388) note the following: "Self-direction and self-responsibility is defined, monitored and measured by tutors who are in a position to both allow and disallow students from exercising such responsibility. The final arbiters are the tutors themselves" (Marsh et al 2001:385). Students are not unaware of this undeniable power differential.

In practice, many factors contribute to how open and flexible an institution becomes. Research that focuses on improving our understanding of students' experiences of course design and institutional support enriches our reflection on our practices (Morgan 1991:11; Butterfield 1999:10-11). It is to this area of learner feedback that I now turn for more first-hand input.

STUDY BACKGROUND

Because of my experience in in-service training programmes for teachers and my involvement in distance education as an Instructional Designer at the University of South Africa, I was invited to join a team of part-time tutors for a Bachelor of Education programme offered through distance learning by a residential university in South Africa. The institution had been marketing a range of advanced diploma and degree programmes in education to attract teachers at historically black township schools who wished to improve their qualifications. Hence, enrolment in the distance education component comprised almost exclusively employed school teachers with a three-year professional diploma.

Support to the students mainly took the following forms:

- tutoring
- regular contact lectures at centres around the country
- a network of fellow students with whom to interact while learning.
- continued support throughout the year.

Although I was in charge of three out of twelve semester courses, one course in particular - referred to in this paper as EDP401 - appealed to me because it was a core module taken by all BEd students. My responsibilities included facilitating monthly contact sessions at one of the regional centres and marking assignments submitted by all EDP401 students nation-wide. Tutors had no interaction with lecturers or course writers. A regional coordinator was responsible for all administration matters and ensured that we had the necessary course books and marking guidelines. There were two assignments for which an average mark of 50% was required for admission to the examination. Therefore, my role tended to be limited to

assisting students in interpreting assignment questions and in developing the most appropriate response. As attendance at contact sessions was not compulsory, interaction with the rest of the students was mainly through comments and feedback on their written assignments.

I undertook a study of EDP401 as the first in a series of case studies to uncover distance learners' "views, impressions, feelings, and reactions" (Race 1994:28) with regard to their learning experiences and the institutional conditions associated with these experiences.

The following research questions - based on the notion of psychological access mentioned earlier - were used for further clarification:

- To what extent are students satisfied with the EDP401 course design?
- How meaningful do students find the assessment strategies in EDP401?
- Are there any discrepancies between the forms of support that the institution intends to provide and the actual support received by students?

METHODOLOGY

The participants were a naturally bounded group of 173 EDP401 students who had submitted semester assignments. Because face-to-face interaction was limited to the small group that I saw at my regional centre - where attendance varied between 8 and 26 students - a questionnaire was attached to each marked assignment and mailed to all students. A numerical rating scale ranging from 1 to 4 was applied, where 1 corresponded to "strongly disagree" and 4 to "strongly agree". The questionnaire included background and demographic questions to elicit students' descriptions of themselves, experience and behaviour questions to elicit what they do or have done, opinion and value questions to elicit how students think about their experiences, and a feeling question to elicit how they feel about their experiences. The questionnaire also included open-ended questions on four topics - contact with lecturer, study guide, assignments, and the course structure - to allow students to respond in their own words (Le Compte & Pressle 1993:171).

In addition to the questionnaire ratings, students' comments on the assignment cover and notes of students' needs and expectations expressed at contact sessions were integrated into the study. Responses to the open-ended questions were thematically analysed and grouped according to specific patterns of essential descriptions.

RESULTS

Of the 173 questionnaires sent out, 40 were returned, representing a response rate of only 23.1%. Such low responses to mail questionnaires are not uncommon, though. Taplin and Jegede (2001:139) describe a 24.2% response in one of their studies as "typical of that which is normally obtained from OUHK (Open University of Hong Kong) students for mailed questionnaires, even despite telephone reminders". The 17 males and 23 females in this survey are employed at public schools as teachers (45%), heads of department (20%), deputy principals (10%) or principals (25%). From their responses, the following categories of expectations and needs emerged:

Course design and learning materials

95% of the students agree that EDP401 is a useful course. They describe EDP401 as "enjoyable", "thought provoking", "absolutely interesting", and "fruitful". Other comments include

If EDP401 could be taken as one of the main subjects at school, I think crime would decrease. Political parties can fall under one party ruled by one man - God.

Make it relevant to Masters degree, introduce research methodology.

77.5% find the study guide useful and 70% enjoy the topics covered in the course. Yet, some students require more guidance from the study guide.

Study Guides should serve their purpose of guiding in a simpler and more detailed way.

A useless skeleton that must be filled with matter, we only get activities that require information from us.

Activities are too difficult. Questions are asked in such a way that when you refer to the text you get confused.

Language should be simplified so as to make the subject less of a threat and make interaction with questions easier.

A continual flow of explanations, no diagrammatic representation.

The quality of the study materials is an issue. Students also want value for money and they would like a comprehensive study package and an inclusive course fee.

Study guide of poor quality - seems free hand was used, print too small, pages are not clearly indicated and does not open like a book. It is confusing.

Other universities provide their students with relevant materials to study. Ours are just guides but we are paying too much money. This is wrong really. It is discouraging.

We have no libraries or bookshops in rural areas. Books are scarce, it costs R100 to go to the library.

Content is criticised for representing a single philosophy. Students would like to have a broader perspective.

Need not focus only on God/Christianity; the course should take other religions and philosophies into account.

Confusing but gets clearer as one goes through it over and over, all topics related to Christianity - one sided.

Assessment

Almost all the students (92.5%) say that doing the assignments helps them acquire a deeper understanding of the course. However, while some find assignments "easy to understand", "OK" and "challenging, demand one's point of view" other students experience the opposite. They find assignments "discouraging", "not straight forward", "not clear". Recommendations made on improving assessment procedures include the following:

Give specific guidelines beforehand for assignment writing, structure and style, etc.

Give students a second chance to redo assignments.

Should get back to students in time for exam prep, help students not to repeat the same mistakes.

A certain % of assignment marks be used toward exam, combine assignment + exam mark to determine pass mark.

77.5% find the marker's comments constructive and 75% find the marking "fair". However, students did not always understand how the mark was calculated.

Good, but low marks not related to marking itself.

I did badly, marker said I did not discuss the three perspectives and I did not have table of contents, some comments not legible.

Students did not seem keen on communicating their study needs or experiences in the space created for this purpose on assignment cover sheets. The most common comment was "I received study materials late". The following excerpts capture some of the "richer" one-to-one interactions:

Student A: This is a repeat of Assignment 1 previously submitted by me. Thank you for asking me to resubmit it. I hope I have done better now. Thank you.

My response: I can't remember precisely what your previous assignment was like. I shall comment on this submission. Thanks for taking the trouble to make the necessary adjustments. Best wishes.

About the assignment: ...

Student B: The main problem with this and other assignments was that the contact sessions came late for timeous submissions within due dates.

The worst nightmare was when I learnt that there wont be any session for EDP401.

With regard to this assignment in particular, I could not find any detailed sources, especially for implementation of this developmental plan! Despite this, I did make full use of the meagre sources available to me.

My response: Well tried - given the constraints you've mentioned above. NB: Markers do not handle administrative enquiries. However, your concerns are communicated to [the office] for their attention.

About your assignment: Evidence of good grasp of broad management issues and planning procedures. However, ...

Access to lecturer and students

Nearly all students have a need for contact with the lecturer - by telephone and face-to-face. They particularly need assistance in writing assignments. Only one student "did not seek contact because I thought I could proceed on my own". Contact with other students, though noted, does not seem to be the primary need.

It could have been excellent if I had somebody to help me when I get stuck. Some of the problems need face to face.

1st year students need orientation on the course and to meet lecturers.

Can we please find the lecturers before we write assignments, to explain what they expect us to do.

Administrative support and access to information

Students are dissatisfied with the organisation of contact sessions:

Poor arrangements, sessions clashed. I think more attention is given to campus students.

I went to Pretoria no one turned up, then I drove to Jo'burg and I was told they only help 2nd semester students. I went to Pietersburg the following week but the venue was changed after 5 hours. According to me lecturers were not competent so I lost interest.

Contact sessions should be centralised. Next vacation school be moved to other venues.

But, there were positive experiences:

Guidelines given by lecturer about doing assignments were of great benefit.

I met my tutor, found solution to my problem, it was interesting.

Dissatisfaction about late receipt of information and study material is expressed in the following comments:

Many students have discontinued their studies ... because of lack of complete materials and support.

Information is sent out late.

Admin staff (clerks, facilitators and reps) should keep to their promises.

In general, more than half of the students (52.5%) feel that they are supported by the institution.

DISCUSSION

The sparse database from which the responses are drawn is inadequate for any conclusive interpretation of students' experiences and their underlying causes. As will be shown later, further research needs to be undertaken for a more representative picture of which aspects students value and why. Nevertheless, some preliminary connections can be made.

Student characteristics

The "typical" EDP401 student is a teacher with a three-year professional qualification. This distance learner has several years of work experience and is more mature than the average residential student at the same institution. Thus, the students bring certain wisdom and expectations to the course. For example, they compare their course package with the national outcomes-based learning programmes that they are expected to implement and they want to see how the course translates into direct benefits for them as practitioners. They also want value for their time and money. So they expect to receive course material and all official correspondence in time, and require a prompt response to their queries.

Another general characteristic observed at contact sessions is student dependency on the tutor to provide all the information and "tips" they require for assignments and examinations without the students thinking incisively about the material or challenging the course content. It seems that even though some teachers have been introduced to outcomes-based

approaches to teaching and learning, as students they still need to be assisted in becoming active participants in the learning process.

Unmet expectations

There is some discrepancy between the quantitative and qualitative results. While a high percentage of the student group rate the course as "useful" and "enjoyable", and the assessments as "helpful", the verbal comments tend to emphasise negative experiences which students have had. It is possible that in the absence of the promised "continued support" and individual attention, students saw the survey as an opportunity to voice complaints and problems. There is a feeling that academic and administrative staff do not listen to or support students. Perhaps even the fact that there was a very low response rate to the questionnaire could be attributed to the discouragement, loss of interest, or indifference associated with students' perception of lecturers as incompetent and administrative staff as unreliable.

Prospects of regular academic support through contact sessions - an opportunity which is not always offered by distance education providers - contributed to students' decision to join the EDP401 course. Therefore, whenever such contact occurs it should be of the highest quality.

Quality control

Education provision is strongly influenced by the infrastructure and culture of the individual institution on the one hand, and student circumstances on the other. Any superior outcomes intended in the original EDP401 design seem to have been compromised by lack of proper layout and print control, ill-chosen tutorial venues, tutors not turning up for exam discussions, and poor communication with administrative staff. That tutors and lecturers never interacted, despite the fact that the former handle all student assessment tasks - with the exception of examinations - is another serious gap in the quality control loop.

Balancing control with learner support

Education processes that are preplanned and prescribed right down to the last detail are not open to spontaneous interventions and unforeseen developments. Yet, the transition from a "closed" learning agenda to an open and flexible one places greater demands on individual learners (Marsh et al 2001:389). Most students learn best when they are given explicit guidelines and encouragement. For example:

- identification of the relevance of course outcomes to the learner's goals
- advice on how to handle various concepts, information and activities
- encouragement to follow a well-structured study schedule rather than simply do what is necessary to answer assignment questions
- encouragement to seek help effectively
- an approach to study matter in which students build up overviews and utilise their own experiences to facilitate their understanding
- strategies for time management so that students find ways to devote more time to their studies (Taplin & Jegede 2001:151-152; Race 1994:108-128)

Peters (1998:62) points out that in addition to providing curriculum and in-text support, helping students deal with administrative or personal problems related to their studies should not be seen as "something that is on the periphery of the learning and teaching process". There seems to be a need for very specific details on the forms of and extent to which support will be provided and what should not be expected. Such an explanation should not only spell out what the student's responsibilities and institutional obligations are, but should also state what recourse the student has if expectations are not met.

Staff development

The aim of distance education is to provide learning opportunities in a way that is convenient for learners rather than for lecturers or tutors. Instructional design and interaction procedures are the main tools for overcoming the distance in the teaching and learning relationship (Moore & Kearsley 1996:2, 200). Introducing this model as a way of creating more open learning environments for learners will no doubt have far-reaching implications for staff. To promote quality and an open culture, Ashcroft and Foreman-Peck (1996:23), Butterfield (1999:10-11) and Lewis (1998:30-31) argue for generous staff development programmes focused on ensuring that staff are competent to meet the demands of their changing work context. Academic and support staff also need opportunities to acquire specific competencies to support students in a variety of ways. In fact academic and support staff need to excel at assessment of student competence, written feedback, contact classes, phone counselling, and video-conferencing.

In addition to engaging in the pursuit of academic scholarship and intellectual inquiry through research, learning and teaching, higher education institutions are required to promote human resource development and establish an academic climate characterised by free and open debate, critical questioning of prevailing orthodoxies and experimentation with new ideas (White Paper 3 1997:8, 14). As Pratt (1994:32-33) states, it is when we are able to seek out and evaluate alternative viewpoints and adapt them to reflect our educational vision and the needs of our students that we become "autonomous and authentic professionals". Students should be seen as partners in a joint project whose purpose is to achieve a shared knowledge and culture construct. It is to those who have an interest in, and are affected by, our practices and processes but have limited power to influence the overall direction of change that we should be most accountable (Ashcroft & Foreman-Peck 1996:24).

CONCLUSION

What learners say about their learning experiences is one of the crucial inputs in course design and evaluation. Learner feedback assists in identifying the strengths and shortcomings of a curriculum or course. Allowing the learners' voice to be heard affirms their role as contributors to the planning and development of their studies (Pratt 1994:39-41; Race 1994:28). Moreover, feedback can highlight discrepancies between institutional assumptions and the forms of knowledge, learning styles, aspirations, needs, and values that learners bring to the learning scene. Establishing meaningful dialogues with students should be seen as an invaluable step towards creating a match between our intentions and expectations and those of our students. Thus, we need the guidance of input from many cycles of action research and empirical data collection involving our particular institution and reflecting student circumstances. I intend to pursue this path as I engage in numerous dialogues, each presenting rich experiences on which to reflect and act.

REFERENCES

- Ashcroft, K & Foreman-Peck, L 1996. Quality standards and the reflective tutor. *Quality Assurance in Education* 4(4):17-25.
- Banks, C A & Banks, J A 1995. Equity pedagogy: an essential component of multicultural education. *Theory Into Practice* 34(3):152-158.
- Bourdieu, P, Passeron, J & De Saint Martin, M 1994. *Academic discourse: linguistic misunderstanding and professor power*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bruner, J 1996. *The culture of education*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Butterfield, 1999. Implementing quality in distance education: meeting learners' needs - an institutional perspective. *Open Learning Through Distance Education* 5(3):7-11.
- Freire, P 1998. *Pedagogy of freedom: ethics, democracy, and civic courage*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

- Kelly, A V 1989. *The curriculum: theory and practice*. 3rd edition. London: Paul Chapman.
- Le Compte, M D & Pressle, J 1993. *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research*. San Diego, CA: Academic.
- Lewis, R 1998. Staff development in conventional institutions moving towards open learning, in Latchem, C & Lockwood, F (eds) *Staff development in open and flexible learning*. London: Routledge:23-32.
- Marland, P 1997. *Toward more effective open and distance teaching*. Stirling, VA: Kogan Page in association with the IET, Open University.
- Marsh, C, Richards, K & Smith, P 2001. Autonomous learners and the learning society: systematic perspectives on the practice of teaching in higher education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 33(3 & 4):381-395.
- McLaren, P & Da Silva, T T 1993. Decentering pedagogy: critical literacy, resistance and the politics of memory, in McLaren, P & Leonard, P (eds) *Paulo Freire: a critical encounter*. London: Routledge:48-101.
- Moore, M G 1993. Three types of interaction, in Harry, K, John, M & Keegan, D (eds) *Distance education: new perspectives*. London: Routledge:19-24.
- Moore, M G & Kearsley, G 1996. *Distance education: a systems view*. Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth.
- Morgan, A 1991. *Research into student learning in distance education*. Australia: Deakin University & University of South Australia.
- Morgan, A 1993. *Improving your students' learning: reflections on the experience of study*. London: Kogan Page.
- Parkes, J 2000. The interaction of assessment format and examinees' perceptions of control. *Educational Research* 42(2):175-182.
- Peters, O 1998. *Learning and teaching in distance education: analyses and interpretations from an international perspective*. London: Kogan Page.
- Pithers, R T 2000. Critical thinking in education: a review. *Educational Research* 42(3):237-249.
- Pratt, D 1994. *Curriculum planning: a handbook for professionals*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace.
- Race, P 1994. *The open learning handbook*. 2nd edition. London: Kogan Page.
- Rumble, G 1989. "Open learning", "distance learning", and the misuse of language. *Open Learning*, June:28-36.
- Rumble, G 2000. Student support in distance education in the 21st century: learning from service management. *Distance Education* 21(2):216-235.
- South Africa (Republic). Department of Education 1997. *A programme for higher education transformation: Education White Paper 3*. Pretoria: Government Printer.

Taplin, M & Jegede, O 2001. Gender differences in factors influencing achievement of distance education students. *Open Learning* 16(2):133-154.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Milly Daweti joined the Bureau for Learning Development in 2000 after working as a staff developer in Gauteng Department of Education. She is currently pursuing PhD studies with Rhodes University. Research interests: teaching as communication, organisational learning, professional cultures and identities, interpretive and action research.

