

## Reaching out: Supporting black learners in distance education

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### ABSTRACT

Learners, like everybody else, need support as they go through life, especially when going through the big challenge of attending a university. The main purpose of supporting learners is to provide an environment that improves students' commitment and motivation to learn. This is particularly relevant in South Africa, given the 2001 National Plan for Higher Education which states that higher education institutions must increase access to previously disadvantaged people in order to redress past inequalities. With increased demand for access to higher education, especially on the part of black students, institutions of higher learning are now increasingly challenged to improve their understanding of how people learn radically if they are to develop learning programmes that are supportive and responsive to learners' needs. For many years, learner support has been placed alongside the educational process. It has been regarded by higher education providers as a facility that provides safety nets for those who fall, rather than the process that enhances the quality of the learner's experience. This can only be improved if institutions such as the University of South Africa (Unisa) could critically assess students' needs. Information about potential learners is important to inform the policy and planning of development programmes, course design and materials development. This article focuses on socio-cultural and historical effects of institutions of socialisation on black learners, and how these factors influence learning; it then suggests ways in which black learners can be supported.

## INTRODUCTION

Since 1994, various government policy papers have outlined a number of strategies to redress the imbalances created by the apartheid system. One of these strategies was to improve access for poorer students to institutions of higher learning (CHE 2004). Distance education was identified as the system that could provide access to education and training for those people who did not have the opportunity to study full time – either because they lived in remote rural areas or because they had full-time jobs. Distance education has also been proven to enable younger people to get access to higher learning, specifically those young people who do not meet the requirements of campus-based institutions or who have financial problems (the fees are generally lower in distance education institutions (CHE 2004)). For most of these students, distance education is the only feasible approach to obtaining education. However, according to the 1995 National Commission to Distance Education report, distance education institutions have not been successful in enabling learners to perform to their maximum potential. The gap has been blamed on inadequate education offered at university and a lack of understanding of the needs of distance education learners. The commission on distance education found that the quality of education is based on an outmoded and very limited conception of what distance education is, and how it should be managed and provided (National Commission on Distance Education 1995, xxii).

In the same way as other universities, the University of South Africa (Unisa) assumes that when students enter higher education they must have completed their general education at school and have done well. There is also an assumption that students come from backgrounds that equip them with the skills they need to adjust comfortably to the university environment (McInnis 2001). In fact, most of Unisa's black students come from homes where they are first-generation learners in higher education; furthermore, they come from schools that are poorly resourced and that have not prepared them adequately for higher education. Yet when these students enter higher education, they are expected to learn complex new material independently and to adjust to new ways of learning in a distance learning environment. There is very little (if any) research on trying to understand how learners from different cultures interact and interpret information for the purposes of learning in distance education, especially in the South African context. Although some researchers have found a correlation between learners' performance in their academic work and their attitude towards education, very little research has been done into the effects of socio-cultural influences on learning (Glennie 1996; Van Heerden 1997). In researching access in higher education, Walters (2004, 410) found that research in this area is more difficult because there is no database or information that identifies social characteristics of students; that investigates the factors associated with the students' decision to participate in higher education; that investigates how institutions can support adult learners; and that tries 'to understand more deeply why there is seemingly so little interest in understanding [students' needs] when the policy states otherwise.'

Although Unisa's students represent diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, this article will focus on black learners and will specifically analyse the socio-cultural and

historical factors that influence learning in higher education and how black learners can be supported. An understanding of what distance learners need requires a new mindset, a shift away from educators being controllers of the learning process to being facilitators of learning. Learners can only be supported if educators understand where they come from. A worldview is, by and large, shaped by the process of socialisation. It is, therefore, important to analyse the various institutions that interact with an individual and that are said to influence an individual in various ways (Vygotsky 1930/1978). The socio-cultural, economic and political environment in which learners grew up contributes considerably to their approach and performance in their academic arena (Van Heerden 1997). 'Cognitive processes and factors in the cultural and social environment are not independent because one cannot separate the individual from the context' (Bempechat and Abrahams 1999, 844). Research on understanding students' learning should therefore include the social and cultural context in which such learning occurs.

It is only through this understanding that learners can be supported as they go through their formal educational experience. For many students, entering higher education institutions is a major transition and yet they get little or no support as they attempt to deal with this new experience. Learners need support as they go through life, especially when undergoing a major change such as entering into study programmes at university level. 'Learner support entails a range of activities which complement mass produced learning materials' (Tait 1995, 232). Indeed, it plays a critical role in improving the performance of distance education learners. Distance education institutions are therefore challenged to provide sustainable and integrated learner support systems. Learner support should be an integral part of successful distance education. This can only be achieved if curriculum developers and educators understand how learners learn. Course developers and educators should show interest in responding to their learners' needs. It goes without saying that South African distance education institutions should be service-orientated in order to address access needs. In a service-orientated industry, a learner or a client would be central to the learning process. According to Sewart (1998, 7), customers take part in the process. In other words, the production and the consumption of a product are connected.

## **INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT**

Prior to the development of a course, it is important to determine who the learners are and what they are required to achieve on completion of the course. The challenge of developing a learner-centred course is based on the following questions: who benefits from the course? What are learners going to use the course for? What do the learners hope to achieve? These questions are important in forming the basis of developing course material, because course designers and developers need to know who they are developing the course for, and why they are developing the course. They also need to ask themselves if the information contained in the course is relevant or recognised by the student's community. In other words, is the course addressing the needs of the students? What types of support do they need? For the purposes of this study, I shall focus on stage 1 in Table 1.

Table 1: Four stages of course development focusing on an analysis of a distance education learner

Analysis	Who are our learners? How do they learn? What is their background? How do they understand distance education learning? What type of support do our learners need? How to we meet the needs of our learners?
Design	Determine the aim of the course Formulate outcomes Select teaching material – media analysis Identify assessment criteria
Develop	Formulate behavioural objectives for each unit Select the content material Classify the material Structure the content Provide learning guidelines Elicit performance Provide feedback
Evaluate	Determining criteria for evaluation Piloting the course Evaluating learners Analysing the content of the course Monitoring how learners are progressing

The analysis of the learner should include answering the question: who are the learners? To answer this question, the student’s behaviour and actions, as well as his or her frame of reference as defined and described by institutions of socialisation need to be understood. Education systems, family and peers are part of the institutions of socialisation that Bourdieu refers to as *social fields*. Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory is more concerned with investigating how relations of social domination are reproduced from generation to generation (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). ‘An individual is usually trapped within the limits of his brain and within the limits of the system of categories he owes to his upbringing and training’ (p. 126). This is particularly true in South Africa where, historically, the ideological function of education was designed to fit in with the social arrangements prescribed by apartheid policies. The apartheid system was organised along racial and ethnic lines. In this system, ‘white education indoctrinates white students to develop capacity to decide and to rule whereas black education domesticates’ (Greenwood 1988, 19). ‘Those classified as non-whites (Blacks, Indians and Coloureds) were expected to labour to serve white society and culturally assume the roles and practices expressing subordination’ (Reddy 2000). The apartheid education objective was to teach non-white young people that their ‘otherness’ and inferiority was natural. The idea was to establish two different types of political classes – an upper social class of ‘whites-only’ elite and a majority of ‘non-white’ labouring class to perform unskilled labour for the industrial economy (Reddy 2000). In South Africa there were huge disparities of education provision between black and white students.

Access to education for black students has increased significantly since 1994. The proportion of black students increased from 32 per cent in 1990 to 60 per cent in 2000 in all universities, while, in technikons, it rose from 32 per cent to 72 per cent over the same period (Cloete 2005). In 2001, Unisa's proportion of black students was 66 per cent compared with 56 per cent in 1993. The female proportion rate was 57 per cent in 2001, a 6 per cent increase from 1993 (Cloete 2005). The average age of Unisa students is 30. The majority of Unisa students are in full-time employment, although there is a considerable percentage of school leavers. The Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET) report has shown that the trend at Unisa is similar to other universities. The number of black students increased from 191 000 in 1993 to 343 000 in 1999, which constituted 59 per cent of the total headcount in all institutions of higher learning (Walters 2004). The considerable growth of black students can be attributed to the fact that, for the first time in South African history, black students can now apply to any institution of their choice. However, the increase of black students has 'not necessarily changed the curricula, the pedagogical process, the structural arrangements or the culture' (Walters 2004, 36).

At Unisa, the proportion of black staff members was 17 per cent in 1999, an increase from 5 per cent in 1993 (Cloete 2005). Most of the lecturers at Unisa are white, although the student body is mostly black. In identifying four areas that influence the learning and teaching interaction, Hofstede (1986) argues that the following influence the education transaction: the social positions of learners and teachers; the relevance of the content in the training material; the cognitive abilities between the populations from which the teacher and the learner are drawn; and role expectations of both teacher and students. If teachers and learners come from different cultural backgrounds, it is likely that the learner will arrive at quite different interpretations of the educational text from the one intended by the producer (teacher) of the learning material. The underlying assumption has always been that South African learners process information in the same way as Americans and other Westerners. 'The know-how that led to the wealth of industrialised countries is not necessarily the same that will bring wealth to poorer countries' (Hofstede 1986, 307).

However, new policies that are trying to address the imbalances and inequalities enter into a field that is marked with apartheid discourses. A lot has changed since 1994, but those who go to schools and universities do not perform to their maximum potential. The drop-out rate in higher education in South Africa is very high. There is no doubt that the history of South Africa's political, social and educational inequalities has contributed to the present education crisis in the country. Pedagogic actions in education, according to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), encompass more than the process of formal education: they produce a social system that benefits the ruling class. This is why distance education institutions require a new mindset that would encourage a shift away from educators as being controllers of the learning process to teachers being facilitators of the leaning process. This change of mindset also needs to embrace the belief that all learners should be given the opportunity to perform to their maximum potential. An awareness of how people learn will help educators to augment their methods of presentation. Learners bring to learning a great diversity of learning styles. It is, therefore,

critical that educators acknowledge and work out the potential conflicts and misunderstandings that may undermine students' learning. This may not be a panacea that solves all learners' problems, but it can help educators to develop learning material that is responsive to learners' needs while, at the same time, improving student learning.

## **SOCIO-CULTURAL EFFECTS OF LEARNING**

The primary mode of socialisation is an important factor in learning. In oral societies, learning is situational and contextually based, rather than categorical and abstract (as in literate societies (Shade 1997)). To consider this issue, it is necessary to examine the ways in which black students perceive, encode, represent and analyse information. The process of perception on how people select, organise and interpret information is based on their frame of reference which, in turn, develops out of sociological, psychological, physical, emotional and environmental factors (Sawadogo 1995; Shade 1997; Bennett 1997; Dunn et al. 1994). Cultural experience shapes an individual's motivation to learn, his or her own interpretation of the learning material and the way one responds to the learning material.

It is, therefore, important that the analysis of the course development takes into account the characteristics of the learners for whom the course is intended. A profile of learners is never complete without reference to their cultural learning styles, something that is usually neglected in teaching. It is against this background that the cultural background of the learner the study material is prepared for, should be understood. Hofstede (1986, 302) defines *culture* as 'the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another'. It is important to note that culture deals with how people interact with one another. Patterns in the way parent and child interact is carried over into teacher/learner and boss/subordinate interaction. This is why, according to Hofstede, cross-cultural learning has always been problematic. In most cases, he says, members of the richer nations play the teacher role and those of the poorer nations a learner role. 'The military and the economically strong have always been the teachers and the weak have always been the learners' (Hofstede 1986, 302).

The cognitive development of people is determined by the demands of the environment in which they grew up. Experiments have shown that different societies process information differently. Other studies have also shown that a knowledge of the context in which learning takes place is necessary if educators are to understand why students describe learning the way they do. Researchers who investigated Chinese learners' conception of learning found that these students regard knowledge as something 'indispensable to their personal life' (Li 2003, 264). This is based on the old-age Confucian understanding of knowledge which regards 'learning as the only pathway toward the highest goal of life' (Li 2003, 264). In Malaysian culture, learning and education are synonymous with personal relationships. 'In this community, learning was also seen as responsibility or obligation' (Merriam and Mazannah 2000). People learn so that they are better able to help others. This is similar to the aboriginal cultures. In the Eastern context, collective and interdependent behaviour and relationships are valued, whereas Western cultures tend to focus on the individual over the group – Western

culture is task-orientated, independent and competitive (Merriam and Mazannah 2000). The epistemological Western traditions are based on the premise that the acquisition of knowledge is a process by which an individual's mind acquires what is 'out there'. There seems to be a systematic difference in how learning is conceptualised in different cultures. Culture influences cognitive styles through socialisation, ecological adaptation and language (Shade 1997, 82).

The information-processing paradigm is based on how people of different cultures process information. In every culture, children are tuned into responding to certain types of information and filtering out other information (Shade 1997). If the child experiences a great deal of body contact and touching, he or she is more likely to re-focus his or her attention on people stimuli rather than on object stimuli. 'These children get to know about the world through kinetic and tactile senses; through the keen observation of the human scene and through verbal descriptions' (Shade 1997, 86). Most black children are brought up in homes where they are surrounded by people other than their primary carers (parents or siblings). In this culture, according to Shade (1997), channels of communication are predominantly auditory and tactile rather than visual and literate. In the African context, learning is generally viewed as a passive process that relies heavily on observation (Sawadogo 1995). Being passive is viewed as a sign of self-control. A passive person, according to Sawadogo (1995, 283), 'is a person who is protected by the gods'. Valuing passivity in the learning environment is therefore based on the acknowledgement that no one possesses the whole truth. In Western culture, in contrast, a passive person is perceived as a person who lacks interest in what he or she is doing and therefore Westerners consciously avoid being viewed as passive.

Communication deals with the process of exchanging information in a meaningful manner. This is particularly problematic in the education interaction, because the meaning of words depends on how words are interpreted. People from different cultures may be exposed to the same message, but they will arrive at different interpretations of the same message. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that many black distance education learners do not study through the medium of their own mother tongue. Although a majority of them choose to study in English, they lack the fluency required to cope adequately with academic work. The structure of African languages differs considerably from English, both in terms of sound and grammar. Subject/verb agreements in English are regarded as being difficult, as is the use of 'he or she' (Shade 1995). This is because, unlike English, African languages do not have gender distinctions. It goes without saying that 'reading comprehension develops in conjunction with what and how much a person reads and it is clear that black students are at a disadvantage when undertaking academic reading in English' (Van Heerden 1997, 419).

The majority of black Unisa students are first-generation university learners and many come from homes where their parents are illiterate or semi-literate, in other words, people who have never bought or read books or newspapers (Van Heerden 1997). In these homes, learning took place through observation and imitation and therefore children were not encouraged to read or study (Shade 1997). Van Heerden's research revealed that there is a clear connection between the students' problems with their academic work and their 'study habits and attitude towards learning' (1997, 418). In

addition, students from families with no history of participation in higher education find university culture extremely difficult to cope with. The lack of understanding of the academic world is linked to an 'overall confusion about the nature and purpose of institutional learning' (Haggis and Pouget 2002, 331). This manifests itself as lack of motivation, interest and understanding of their academic work. This shows that there is a 'mismatch between student "goals and expectations" and the university culture' (Pitkethley 2001, 186).

Research priorities for distance education in developing countries may rest more appropriately in an understanding and recognition that learners from Western cultures are competitive, but learners from developing countries are co-operative. Guy (1990) makes a clear distinction between learners in developing countries and those from developed countries. Learners from developed countries tend to be individualistic in nature, whereas those from developing countries believe in collectivism. In addition, cultures in developing countries are oral in nature and distance education often fails to provide the most important visual signals involved in face-to-face communication, signals that are fundamental to those who come from oral cultures.

## **DISTANCE EDUCATION**

Distance education needs to be critically assessed and viewed in the context in which it occurs if it is to realise its potential in the developing world (Guy 1990). Since learners from developing countries learn differently from learners in developed countries, teaching should also be different. Wilson (1993) describes African learners as field dependent, meaning that learners from this part of the world are more likely to be global, that is, sensitive to the distracting elements, whereas learners from developed countries are more independent, meaning that they are more likely to be analytical. He defines learners from developed countries as field independent. He explains field-dependent learning styles as group-orientated, vulnerable to criticism, in need of advance organisers, learning best through visual modelling, extrinsically motivated and learning best through small-step programmes (Guy 1990). In Western learning environments, learners are expected to be actively involved by asking questions. In an African context, this is considered improper and intrusive. To an African, asking a question is a challenge, whereas, in Western culture, questions are utilised to check the veracity of statements and facts.

Since most of the teachers are white and Unisa learners are predominantly black, there are differences in profiles of cognitive abilities between the populations from which the teacher and the students are drawn. In the educational field, lecturers receive greater authority to communicate, 'due to the cultural and symbolic capital acquired through academic qualifications and the occupational status in the institution' (Read et al. 2003, 270). Within the dominant classes, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argue that teachers have the most cultural capital and tend to reward students who possess this cultural capital. According to Walters (2004, 35), 'there are wide disparities in the graduation rates of black and white students', and 'the average graduation rates of white students are double those of black students'. Since cultural capital is socially conferred



and taken as natural, students from lower classes (black students) are less likely to have a cultural capital that is congruent with that of their teachers. The greater the difference between the worldview of a teacher and that of a student, the more likely it is that the students' and teachers' preferred ways of communicating and participating will be different (Bennett 1995, 136). How do people acquire these skills and preferences? People acquire these skills and preference as a result of the family and environment in which they grew up. The approach to teaching has been what the educator wants a learner to know rather than what a learner will do and achieve. People are socialised into believing that lecturers 'know which chunks of knowledge are most important for the learner' (Barr and Tagg 1995, 21).

During the development process of study material, it should always be remembered that students are vulnerable because of the powerless position they occupy in the educational discourse (George 1995). Most learners enter distance education institutions with expectations of past schooling. A learner sees his or her role as directed by the teacher. This is especially true at Unisa, because most learners come from environments where learning is directed and controlled by a teacher (this is especially true of those who come from poorly resourced schools). When they are thrown into distance learning environments, these learners feel lonely, insecure and alienated from the education system. Bourdieu (1977) argues that these students lack cultural capital passed down from family and peers. Cultural capital consists of linguistic and cultural competence, and a broad knowledge of the culture that belongs to members of the upper class; as such, cultural capital is found less frequently among the lower classes (Bourdieu 1977). Lower-class students tend to have little cultural capital and they are unlikely to succeed educationally (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Although cultural capital appears as a given and, therefore as natural, it is in fact an imposition legitimated by the ruling class (dominant group) (Bourdieu 1977).

In many South African institutions of higher learning, learning has been based on the premise that educators know best. In other words, they know what they, as educators, want a learner to know rather than what a learner will do and achieve. Unisa, like most South African educational institutions, has been institution-centred rather than learner-centred. There is an almost complete absence of learner-centredness in the teaching and learning material in Unisa's education system (Glennie 1996, 23). This system is based on a very formal and inflexible system that was inherited from the former British system, where a teacher was regarded as someone who knows it all and the learner viewed as an empty, passive vessel that ingests knowledge for later recall in tests (Barr and Tagg 1995, 21). The South African educational system was also modelled on Afrikaans Christian National Education system. In this system, 'white education indoctrinated white students to develop capacity to decide and to rule whereas black education domesticated black students' (Greenwood 1988, 19). In this system, black education was meant to prepare black children for subservience and docility. Children learnt to follow instructions accurately. Course writers and teachers were authorities in the subject and learners were expected to do what they were told.

Most black learners who enrol in distance education institutions are socialised and raised in environments that are significantly different from that which predominates in

institutions of higher learning. For these learners, 'so much energy is invested in adjusting to institutions' expectations of appropriate behaviour that there is very little left for the business of learning' (Bennett 1997, 132). If learners do not see themselves in the learning material, they feel as if they do not exist, are not important or do not matter to other people and this feeling can lead to a lowering of their sense of self-worth (Lee 1997). Although a person's learning style is important, it should be noted that a person's behavioural style is usually a cultural framework for how that person views the world. However, a person's basic style of learning can be changed when certain aspects of other learning styles are taught (Lee 1997, 158).

Another major conflict, which directly applies to distance education, is that learners have to be independent. In most African cultures, a learner becomes very dependent on the educator because knowledge is highly valued, respected and even feared. 'From young age and on to adulthood, a dependency relationship is nurtured and strengthened between the child and the sources of knowledge' (Sawadogo 1995, 284). In African cultures, independence reflects behaviours that only social rejects and marginalised individuals adopt to express themselves. Independence is only acceptable among peers. This is because children of the same sex and age are raised together and it is within that group that people are allowed to challenge one another. In Western culture, a child can challenge or even ask an adult questions. Field-dependent learners rely upon the environment of learning because they are interpersonally orientated; they also rely heavily on external stimuli and they look towards others for reinforcement of opinions and attitudes. As a result, they are more likely to respond best in environments that evoke their feelings, experiences and emotions (Dunn et al. 1994).

To most black learners, learning is a social process in terms of which a learner feels the need to interact with fellow learners and teachers. Group interaction is central to the way they learn in their communities. In a South African culture a person is defined in terms of *ubuntu*, meaning 'humanity to others'. The traditional concept of *ubuntu* focuses on people's relationships with one another, that is, 'I am what I am because of who we all are'. The *ubuntu* concept contrasts sharply with the notion of individual independencies on which distance education is based. In these cultures, the making of meaning is influenced by explicit negotiations with family members, teachers and peers. Peers are the most influential group with whom they implicitly negotiate their understandings of the study materials. In distance education, a learner is deprived of the supportive physical presence of other students or lecturers. The distance learner is not reinforced in his or her study by the competitive and sharing activities of group learning, or by direct help, or by the encouragement of a tutor (Oosthuizen 1995, 26). Isolation and loneliness are some of the reasons students cite for dropping out and failing in distance education courses. To address the problem of isolation, students tend to organise themselves into informal groups that provide encouragement and emotional support, something which most students may not get from their families or the formal academic environment.

## SUPPORTING LEARNERS

The main challenge is that there is a need to develop distance education that embraces other cultures and ways of learning. What does learning mean? There has been a plethora of definitions of learning. Over the years, numerous studies have considered learning from a variety of perspectives. Some theorists define *learning* as an active process of acquiring knowledge; some describe it as an interaction of knowledge, skills and attitudes whereas others regard learning as intertwined with the socio-economic, political and cultural processes (Vygotsky 1930/1978; Henderson and Putt 2002). Almost all theorists agree that *learning* is a process of moving a person from the known to the unknown. Learning is used to enhance personal growth and self-image which, in turn, leads to a sense of social responsibility and commitment to human service. 'While learning occurs in the social context, it is always individual and may be defined as the combination of processes whereby whole personas transform episodic experiences into cognitive, physical and affective outcomes and integrate them into their biography throughout their life-span' (Jarvis 2004, 33).

For many years, 'learning has been studied as if it were a process contained in the mind of the learner and has ignored the lived-in world' (Lave 1996, 150). Learning should be viewed as an integral activity in, and with, the world at all times. Rogoff (1995) described adult learning as a dynamic interaction between the individual and the environmental contexts within which one interacts, and suggested that a complete account of learning and development must take account of the personal, interpersonal or social plane and the institutional/community plane. 'An individual belongs to several communities each with its own rules, histories and cultural practices' (Alfred 2003, 243). It is, therefore, important that any research that deals with learning should look at the context in which learning takes place. According to Vygotsky's view, which is one of contextuality, humans are embedded in a social context and human behaviour cannot be understood independently of this matrix (context) (Cole 2003). The context of learning should be described through the eyes of the learners rather than independently of the learners. In order to achieve this goal, many theorists still believe that the learning process is rooted in the cultural dimension of an individual (Vygotsky 1930/1978; Shade 1997). Understanding how learners process information may go a long way towards ensuring that they get adequate support as they learn.

In constructing a learner-centred support system, Unisa should

- identify learners' needs
- develop a learner support system that addresses learners' needs
- conduct extensive research into the subject
- embrace learner support as an integral part of the higher education system
- define roles of the learner and the lecturer in relations to learner support
- provide support through the actual course that students follow (e.g., have a course on how to write an assignment, university studies and how an institution is run).

Once it is known who the learners are, it becomes easier to decide the support mechanisms that can be provided to learners. The support mechanism has to ensure that

learners, especially adult learners, participate in an active and challenging way in the learning process. What a learner needs, even in distance study, is someone who can help him or her to organise learning opportunities, who learns together, and who explores and examines study material with him or her. Although teaching is predominantly print-driven (i.e., mass-produced study guides and tutorial letters) in distance education, black learners have a need to meet their lecturers and fellow students. The methods of providing support should address this issue of face-to-face contact. Learner support is a process of mediating between the learner and the learning materials which, as has been said, are traditionally print-based (Tait 1995). A good support service in distance education should address the following problems in relation to a distance learner:

- motivate the learner
- encourage group activities by facilitating communication among learners
- provide feedback.

Given the limitations of distance education, it is also important also to consider those factors that influence people's motivation to learn. According to Race (1998), people learn by wanting, that is, they need to want to know and because they want to be able do something at the end of the course. They also want to know why it is important for them to know about this part of knowledge, and therefore, they want to know how to apply this piece of knowledge to their everyday lives. To find out if they have reached their goals, they have to be given feedback. Race (1998, 66) believes that 'wanting, doing, feedback and digesting' is so close to the essence of being human that it is possible to keep these processes firmly in mind. The basic principle of motivating a learner must be learner-centred. This means that a learner must be self-motivated. A learner must know precisely why he or she wants to learn and what he or she wants to learn; the learner also needs to know how to learn. One way of doing this is to engage learners personally in their studies. Thorpe (1998) believes that personal engagement overlaps with developing learners to enable them to learn, as well as realising the outcomes they want from their courses. The first task of a distance education educator is to help learners become aware of the need to know. However, this task does not necessarily mean that a lecturer knows which chunks of knowledge are most important for the learner. Support services systems in education should focus on making a learner understand why he or she should learn a certain type of information and how to use that knowledge in real-life situations.

One of the major problems of a distance learner is that of isolation – isolation from other learners, from teachers and from the distance education institution itself. To address this issue of loneliness, distance education learners should be encouraged to have some form of personal interaction. Thorpe (1998) believes that the quality of the interaction between a learner and his or her peers, a learner and his or her teacher, and a learner and his or her counsellor may enhance and even influence reactions to study. 'Students can feel immediate identification with others in their group and so lose feelings of isolation and over anxiety' (Thorpe 1998, 84). It should be remembered that distance learners have no one to discuss their problems with when they encounter difficulties with their tuition material. Face-to-face tutorials may help here, simply because in such tutorials a learner can solicit help from tutors or peers. To address the

issue of loneliness in distance education, Unisa has a network of community learning centres that provide tutorial support, counselling services and peer-group support. These centres provide a place where people can meet; attend classes and discussion groups; study; and pick up books and other materials for learning (Glennie 1996, 29). Another advantage of learning centres is that, by providing the learner with opportunities to interact with fellow students, faculty and other representatives, the learner is motivated to continue with his or her studies (Wilson 1993, 137).

Some learners try to take the initiative by requesting an address list of other learners in their area who are studying the same course. Unisa's Graduate School of Business has a system of learner-to-learner interaction that actually forces learners to work in groups. In distance education there is strong correlation between care and learner motivation. A lecturer who makes contact with learners helps to allay the fears and anxieties brought on by isolation. It also promotes confidence on the part of the learner and it makes a learner feel that he or she is part of, and belongs to, a group of people who care. Although it is agreed that a learner should be encouraged to be independent, he or she needs help in reaching that goal.

In distance education, a learner is deprived of the supportive physical presence of other students or lecturers. 'A student is not reinforced in his or her study by the competitive and sharing activities of group learning, or by direct help, or encouragement of a tutor' (Oosthuizen 1995, 26). The idea of supporting learners is to empower them. Learning flourishes when learners have an opportunity to develop and utilise their talents and perspectives to the fullest (Rainey and Kolb 1995, 129). This is how learners become empowered and in control of their learning. Learner support should therefore be geared towards ensuring that the difficulties learners encounter are managed and used as a learning experience. Understanding the characteristics of learners also helps course designers and developers with course development.

Some students prefer to learn through listening, touching, moving and interacting with other learners. Auditory people learn best, initially, when they listen to verbal instruction such as lectures, discussion classes or a recording. This type of student prefers spoken messages. Pictures and images also help them understand ideas and information better than explanations (Sims and Sims 2002). They recall what has been read or observed, and they are more likely to be shape- and form-orientated. Tactile learners need to underline, take notes and keep their hands busy; in other words, they like to touch something as they learn. Kinesthetic learners prefer whole body movement and the dramatisation of events. Blackmore (1996) suggests that the most useful strategies for developing material for adult learners should be based on using case studies, role-playing, simulations and self-evaluations, as these can cater for different learning styles.

Learners in distance education should be able to attend workshops and, at Unisa, they should be encouraged to enrol at the learning centres and receive their tutorials in these centres. Those who cannot attend for various reasons should be encouraged to work in groups. Given that most material is print-based, course developers and instructional designers are increasingly challenged to develop and design material that is reader friendly. This means that material should contain a variety of pictures and case studies.

Also, learners should be encouraged, through assignments, to get involved in projects that encourage interaction between themselves and the community. In addition to print-based material, distance educators should examine the possibility of using audio-cassette tapes as part of the learning material. Audio cassettes may be used with print material to bring a voice to the study material. Audio cassettes speak directly to the learner, and thus, add a human dimension to the study material. Another advantage of the audio cassettes is that students can listen to the material at their own time and pace. Learners who cannot attend workshops or group discussions should receive audio-cassettes tapes based on these workshops and group discussions.

Print media can be used for self-paced and individual study. However, printed material should be designed in such a way that there is interaction between the learner and the learning material. Course developers need to recognise that a person learns more effectively when information is presented in a manner congruent with his or her favoured method of processing information (Montgomery 1995). Depending on what course developers' analysis say, one will find that some students prefer pictures, charts and diagrams in their study material. The curriculum designer or educator should use colour-coded graphics to reinforce written words. Given that most black learners prefer the spoken word, the disadvantage of print is that it has the potential for encouraging passivity on the part of these learners. It is, therefore, crucial for course developers to write in such a way that a learner has a direct conversation with the teacher.

For learners who cannot attend workshops, there could be training programmes conducted via the Internet in the week after the workshop. The workshop programme could be synchronised from the lecturers' office with daily training. For example, each day, topics that were discussed at the workshop could be presented, followed by online discussions. Learners who did not participate during stipulated hours could read preliminary materials online and add their comments. This medium (i.e., the online medium) can be used effectively to facilitate discussion. The advantage of this medium is that feedback is almost immediate. Telephone tutoring can also be used to support a two-way communication between the teacher and the learner. Telephone tutoring is better than print because it helps to reduce the learner's sense of isolation. It also helps in facilitating educational transaction on an individual basis. Video- and tele-conferencing reduces students' sense of isolation because it can overcome geographical barriers and, like the online medium, provide students with immediate discussion and feedback. In video-conferencing, students, although separated by location, can see, hear and talk to one another through electronic communication. Garrison (1989, 66) says that tele-conferencing represents a paradigm shift in facilitating and supporting learning at a distance. The problem with this facility is that it is simply not available to most of the Unisa students and it has to happen at a fixed time and place. The answer seems to be to combine various media, as mixing technologies will probably produce better results than using only one method of delivery.

## **CONCLUSION**

Analysing the characteristics of learners has the potential to provide course designers

and developers with a better understanding of the type of support that has to be given to students. The purpose of providing learner support is to ensure that learners derive maximum benefit from the courses and, indeed, the whole experience of being a student. It will also clarify learners' expectations of what is involved in the process of higher learning. In conclusion, everybody needs support as they go through life, especially when experiencing a big change such as going to university. This is why learner support should be geared towards ensuring that the difficulties encountered by (mainly black) learners are managed and used as a learning experience. Understanding the characteristics of our students also helps course designers and developers with course development. It makes course designing and development much easier if the baseline is a proper analysis of learners and their needs.

It is also important that educators use a multiplicity of modalities. Educators should recognise the intimate relationship between culture, language and cognition in order to facilitate the development of thinking and reasoning while, at the same time, teaching learners the joys of learning (Shade 1997, 222). The aim is to support learners so that they derive maximum benefit from the courses they study and, indeed, the whole experience of being a student. Failure to integrate learning programmes with how people of different cultures process information is a failure on the part of the institution to respond to learners' needs. Distance education educators are increasingly challenged to address the issue of black learners who are not achieving because of personal and/or cultural characteristics that conflict with what predominates in their learning material and institutions.

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