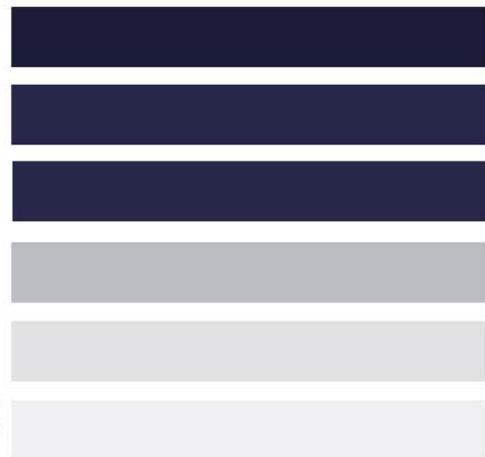


Human Capacity Development



The implementation of the online learning community  
A report to the Senate of Unisa  
(IOP377-J: Human Capacity Development)



This report is a summary of the report presented to the Tuition Committee on 2 August 2002.

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Lastly, learner participants played a key role in this research project as they exposed themselves to a new learning environment. They unreservedly shared their stories with us.

5 August 2002

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## GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS AND KEY TERMS

AR – action research (a cyclical process aimed at change)  
CMC – computer mediated communication (users communicate with one another from different workstations)  
DE – distance education (distance learning)  
E-library – electronic library (WWW interface providing access to library resources in digital format)  
HTML – hypertext mark-up language (used to code Web pages)  
FAQs – frequently asked questions  
ICT – information communication technology  
Internet CMC – computer mediated communication enabled via the Internet  
Internet – worldwide network of networks enabling communication and sharing of resources  
Print/print-based delivery – Unisa's correspondence delivery system  
SOL – Students Online (an online environment for learners at Unisa providing access to information and communication)  
TUWS – Transitional Unisa Web Structure (four departments joining forces to address issues regarding the Internet and WWW at Unisa)  
URL – uniform resource locator (commonly known as a Web address)  
WWW – World Wide Web (a set of software tools and standards that allows individuals to distribute and obtain information stored on the Internet)

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Purpose of the report**

The original version of this report was submitted to the Tuition Committee on 2 August 2002. It was referred to the faculty tuition committees for information and comments on the recommendations.

This report fulfils two requirements stipulated by the Senate of the University of South Africa:

- On 7 December 2000 the Executive Committee approved the full online delivery of IOP377-J, Human Capacity Development, as a pilot project requiring feedback on the success of full online delivery.
- Feedback on this pilot delivery is provided in accordance with the requirement by Senate that reports have to be provided on the success of courses without venue-linked examinations.
- It is expected that this project will also inform print-based (correspondence) delivery because of its integrated tutoring and support.

### **1.2 Background**

IOP377-J (Human Capacity Development, Department of Industrial Psychology, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences) was selected for this pilot delivery owing to its expected ability to attract a different audience. In addition, the new learning experience for adult learners was aimed at empowering and engaging the learner (learner-centredness). The Online Learning Community (OLC) promised to be the appropriate environment with communication enabled by Internet communication technologies.

### **1.3 Structure of the report**

The summary report is presented in four parts:

- Executive summary
- Overview and recommendations
- Methodology
- Research results
- Conclusion

## 2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The online learning community was found to be highly successful as a learning environment when results were compared with print-based delivery (see “*Research results*”). The introduction of the OLC in the Unisa DE environment has, however, challenged the practices and systems underlying the primary delivery mode (print). For it to be successful, it demands a different quality of intervention, which has to be supported by infrastructure and systems.

It was expected that the Unisa system will not necessarily cope with such a delivery without changes in practice and organisation. The introduction of this form of delivery has indeed identified a number of needs for consideration in the Unisa system:

- The University needs to reassess its print-based delivery in order to provide a more integrated learning experience (tutoring and other support should receive a higher priority during learning development).
- Unisa teaching staff should be assisted to become more confident teachers in Unisa’s unique DE environment (regarding both print-based and online delivery).
- Because of the integrated nature of online delivery, it demands a higher level of tuition. Departments will have to accommodate the changes in the workload in their organisation and administration.
- Learning development processes should be aimed not only at individual course packages but also at transforming the University’s practice and systems in order to progress towards the provision of tuition of the highest quality.
- Online learning provision should take cognisance of the needs of the context (value added service and support, course-specific needs and full online delivery).
- It is possible to deliver a successful learning experience with continuous assessment – the accent on the venue-linked examination at Unisa as a standard form of assessment should be requalified.
- Learner access to the Internet and technologies should be far more strongly promoted and as the facilities become available it should be marketed appropriately. Online learning provision is closely related to this issue.
- Online registration procedures and communication with students should be improved so that they really benefit from the nature of these new technologies.
- The fee structure for fully online delivered courses should be adapted to reflect intensive integrated facilitation and tutoring to smaller numbers of students. Service costs for international students should, however, be reconsidered.
- Fully online delivered courses are more expensive in terms of tuition and support as they represent an integrated learning experience. But they are cheaper to produce as they rely on work already done for print-based equivalents, have no printing and dispatch costs, and rely strongly on the



rich additional resources and communication that is available free of charge on the Internet.

### 3. OVERVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 3.1 Introduction

Recommendations are made in terms of the collaborative process undertaken by support and teaching staff and the feedback of learners. The summary of research results, as contained in section 5, can be consulted for further details. The original version of the report can be requested from the author at [heydejf@unisa.ac.za](mailto:heydejf@unisa.ac.za).

#### 3.2 Influencing Unisa's current print-based delivery

Learners and staff, involved in this pilot online delivery, have experienced current print-based delivery as problematic in the following areas:

- Learners and staff often feel alienated from the learning experience.
- There is a risk that the learning experience may not be about “deep learning”.
- The examination process (venue-linked and multiple-choice) does not necessarily provide for proper assessment.
- The absence of written assignments impacts negatively on communication, feedback and ultimately quality learning, and this is compounded by the semester system.
- Learners and staff need to be part of a supportive learning community.

##### **Recommendation 1:**

**The Bureau for Learning Development and the Department of Learner Support should collaboratively develop new criteria and standards for print-based (correspondence) learning experiences. All Unisa courses should be evaluated in terms of such standards, and a plan (taking the recommendations of the Tuition Policy into account) should be developed and implemented to address shortcomings.**

The learner support principles underpinning delivery to the online learning community can positively influence print-based delivery. Learner support from within course delivery seems to have decreased with the implementation of semesterisation. Short delivery schedules do not allow staff sufficient time to communicate with learners and to provide feedback on assignments submitted.

##### **Recommendation 2:**

**Current attempts by the Department of Learner Support are highly regarded. In terms of the success achieved with integrated learner support in the online learning community, learner support at Unisa should be prioritised, better developed and integrated, and better funded. The effect of semesterisation in the Unisa context on the quality of learning should also be investigated. The Bureau for Learning**

**Development and the Department of Learner Support should develop a new learning support policy which should guide learning development in general and which should cultivate a new commitment towards learner support among academic staff (the Learner Support Task Team initiated by the Tuition Committee is a proper vehicle for this task).**

### **3.3 Online tuition and support**

Online facilitation is extremely complex compared with current teaching in print delivery. In general the online facilitator (with the combined responsibilities of “lecturer” and tutor) can be overwhelmed by the amount of work that has to go into successful facilitation. Palloff and Pratt (1999: 48) warn that facilitating an online community-based course may take two to three times longer than face-to-face teaching. This warning is even more important for correspondence teachers who spend even less direct time with learners. Social communication and a sense of community have to be promoted, and additional management and technical duties are essential for successful delivery. Daily attention is required by the teacher in order to avoid a communication backlog and in order to respond to contributions and messages timeously. Mechanisms have to be in place to accommodate such a workload.

#### **Recommendation 3:**

**Unisa teaching staff are often appointed without teaching qualifications appropriate to the higher and distance learning environment. This can be problematic for both print-based and online delivery in terms of standards of tuition and learner support. Because of the different teaching responsibilities demanded from online facilitators, the Bureau for Learning Development should ensure that appropriate training is provided to online facilitators regarding the use of Internet communication technologies to facilitate learning. This will have to include hands-on experience in the form of an online training course.**

#### **Recommendation 4:**

**The Bureau for Learning Development, in collaboration with academic departments, should investigate the impact of teaching online courses together with the normal workload of teaching staff. Recommendations should be made to the Tuition Committee.**

### **3.4 Learning development**

The collaborative process followed by this course development team (IOP377-J, Human Capacity Development) allowed for the critical assessment of support systems and teaching practices. Such a development process will support the mandate of the learning developer to stimulate development and change with the aid of staff, and to reform and adapt systems.

**Recommendation 5:**

**The Bureau for Learning Development should ensure course/learning development processes which allow for the critical assessment of practices and systems. Such a commitment will ensure continuous change towards quality distance learning and a transforming institution.**

**3.5 Online learning provision**

This pilot delivery process has produced very positive results in the distance learning environment. Some of these results are:

- a successful social and community-based learning environment
- learner-centredness and empowerment
- transformative learning
- critical thinking, self-reflection and deep learning
- a scheduled learning environment
- metacognitive development
- expansion of the subject field and course topics
- collaborative knowledge construction
- self-imposed pressure and commitment
- quality support and purposeful communication
- independent research
- improved writing skills

The principles forming the foundation of this learning experience can positively inform other modes of learning at Unisa.

**Recommendation 6:**

**Owing to the positive outcomes produced by the sample course, it is recommended that the Bureau for Learning Development continue, within the framework of the three-tiered structure, to enhance tuition and improve support and service provision to learners and staff involved in print-based and full online delivery.**

**3.6 Non-venue linked examination**

This pilot delivery provided evidence that learners gained from the learning experience based on continuous assessment as compared with the traditional venue-linked examination.

**Recommendation 7:**

**It is recommended that the fully online delivered course, IOP377-J Human Capacity Development, continue with its current assessment structure. Non-venue linked examinations in general should, however, be**

**based on quality continuous assessment allowing for regular feedback and communication.**

### **3.7 Technical assistance and learner access**

The Department of Computer Services was unable to anticipate all the needs of this pilot delivery. With proper planning (and the current integration of services into Lecturers Online and Students Online) the technical infrastructure and support can be improved. Learners also complained about not having regular access from work and from home.

#### **Recommendation 8:**

**Online learning should be based on adequate planning by the Bureau for Learning Development to inform technical support departments timeously so that infrastructure and support can be adapted and improved.**

#### **Recommendation 9:**

**ICT should investigate the broadening of access to the Internet for learners. Learners and staff are in need of Internet connectivity at home at negotiated tariffs.**

### **3.8 Learner administration**

There are some aspects of learner administration which learners experience as frustrating (eg registration and payment):

- Learners found the institution distant when they wanted to obtain information.
- Registering in person was a long and tedious process.
- Online registrations were processed manually, which made them inefficient.
- The electronic transfer of payment is problematic and inconvenient for learners.
- International learners complained about having to pay a levy when they study online – if this fee relates to courier or mail costs for materials then complaints may be justified.

#### **Recommendation 10:**

**The Departments of Undergraduate and Postgraduate Student Affairs should investigate learner registration procedures in order to make them more user friendly and more efficient. Online registrations should ultimately be processed electronically and not manually in order to speed up the process and to derive full benefit from the technologies used. International learner levies should not be applied to full online learners as they do not receive materials by post.**

## **4. METHODOLOGY AND PROCESSES**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This section aims to briefly outline the action research methodology followed. The summary of the results contained in this shortened version of the report is aimed at supplying information regarding processes, developments and the success of the online learning community.

### **4.2 The action research process**

Action research (AR) methodology is concerned with practice, and ultimately structural change, in the educational workplace. It has an essential political element in that it comes dangerously close to putting the practitioner in confrontation with policies and systems. To enable the OLC to be successfully implemented, this methodology promised to assist practitioners on this project to bring about an evolution towards a new production and delivery culture that could better accommodate innovation in the long term.

Action research is conducted in self-reflective cycles of:

- planning
- acting (implementing plans)
- observing (systematically)
- reflecting

The challenge was to synchronise the action research process with current production and delivery cycles in order to assure the desired outcomes. The group attempted to:

- assess the success of this particular implementation of the online learning community at Unisa in terms of a quality learning experience
- determine the needs generated by the introduction of the OLC in the correspondence-based organisational environment of Unisa in terms of the development process, delivery system and support services
- determine the need for change in supporting and facilitating learning and a sense of community in the OLC as compared with current correspondence-based tutoring

### **4.3 Developing “products”, processes and systems**

The development group had to investigate online learning provision at Unisa and adapt the learning development process. The development of this pilot course was more successful against this background of commitment to change.

### 4.3.1 Structuring online learning provision

During the initiation of this project it was evident that staff members at Unisa had different conceptions of what an online course is about. Online course support, enhancement, service provision and delivery were not provided in a coordinated structure, and it was difficult for support staff to plan their activities properly. Efficient and equitable service to learners and staff was therefore not always possible. An analysis of efforts on Students Online (year 2000 statistics) and the external Unisa Website led to the identification of three categories of online learning provision: adjunct mode, mixed mode and full online delivery. These categories had to relate strongly to the cost-efficient provision of value-added service to mainly print-based learners while experimenting with full online delivery for a different audience. The proviso was accepted that at undergraduate level all fully online delivered courses should also have a print-based equivalent in order not to exclude Unisa's primary clients who do not have sufficient Internet access.

### 4.3.2 A new learning development process

In order to successfully accommodate the unique needs of an innovative learning experience during the production process, the development team had to adapt the development process by removing partitions between different functions, and had to accommodate all parties to enable them to claim ownership of the project and the innovation process. Bearing the benefits of collaborative development teams, the unique context of Unisa and past online course development and implementation in mind, a four phase operational process was adopted:

- Reconnaissance
- Planning
- Development and implementation
- Enrichment

### 4.3.3 Developing the course

#### *Pedagogical considerations*

When the online delivery of this course was planned, some important pedagogical principles were investigated (these differed radically from those generally underpinning print delivery) in order to create the desired learning experience (eg the learning theory, learning styles, and the teaching perspective). From an instructional design point of view, the team was of the opinion that these issues should be considered thoroughly as part of the development process. Participants had to explore what they saw as knowledge, the way learners would browse and navigate online content, which collaborative opportunities they should incorporate in order to establish an online community, and what the role of the teacher (as the facilitator) would be.

### *Selecting a course*

After initial reconnaissance, a third-year module presented by the Department of Industrial Psychology, “Human Capacity Development”, was selected for this pilot research project. The selected course (a 16 week module) deals with the topic of human capacity development, addressing issues such as the competent human being, regionalism, globalisation and the need for lifelong learning. The selected course was a well-designed and structured print-based course that had to be converted for the online learning community. It was facilitated by its author who was also a very motivated teacher in the print environment. The course was delivered twice (corresponding with two AR cycles) over 12 months as a pilot in order to provide time for support staff to adapt and grow in this capacity, and for the system to change accordingly.

### *Using available facilities*

Initially it was clear that the Unisa system could not be changed in such a short time to accommodate all the technical requirements of the course. The development group was forced to make use of available technical facilities that excluded an online teaching management system. The whole course was constructed with a popular *html* editor using frames, and communication was added using available discussion forum and chat facilities. The development of content and the technical infrastructure for this course were not expensive as it was able to convert existing content and to use available technical infrastructure.

### *Structuring the course environment*

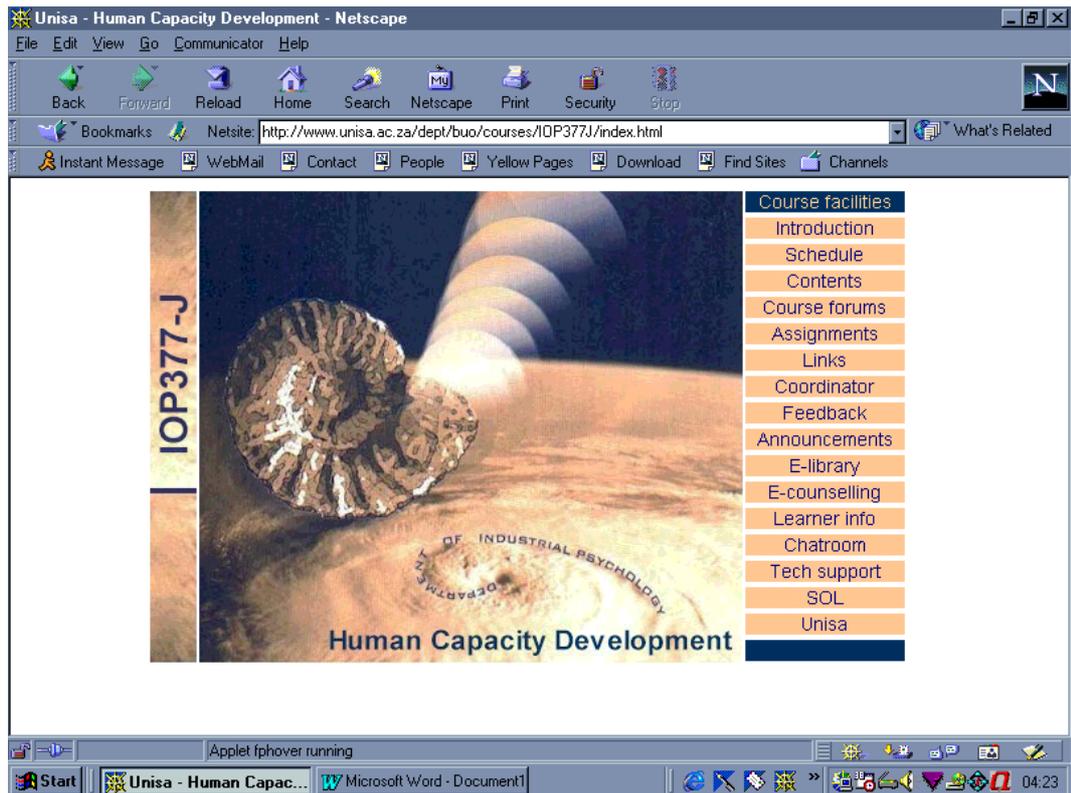
Support was provided in the form of a Student Café, Announcements Forum, Feedback Forum and Technical Forum. A chatroom was added as an optional facility providing learners with the opportunity to experiment with this synchronous technology. An E-library providing access to online resources and training in Internet research skills was developed and added to the course environment. An E-counsellor was trained to assist learners with problems in the distance education and online learning environment. Knowledge construction was facilitated in 6 course forums including 4 discussions, 1 brainstorming session and 1 presentation area for collaborative work. Learners were continuously assessed in terms of online participation, group work and 3 essay assignments (no venue-linked examination was scheduled). Learners were also supported individually through e-mail communication.

### *Working in groups and playing roles*

Group work was preceded by a brainstorming and discussion session – these activities were added to help learners identify suitable topics for the presentations. Learners were grouped in threes to prepare, present and host a topic of their choice. In the small groups learners had to identify an issue that they saw as important, do research on this issue, and present their argument as a group to the rest of the learning community. They had to make use of all the

available resources, and fresh innovative contributions were highly valued. Learners were free to use any form of communication to prepare this presentation. If they felt they needed their own private forum for this purpose, they had to inform the course coordinator. Each group member had a specific role to fulfil - the responsibilities of presenter, moderator and summariser were assigned by the course facilitator.

*The following figure displays the homepage of the course:*



## 5. RESEARCH RESULTS

### 5.1 Introduction and overview

For the purposes of collaborative analysis (all group members were involved in analysing the data), the development group decided to concentrate mainly on e-mail messages, forum discussions, and unstructured interviews as sources of data. The proceedings of meetings were also used to inform the research. The participants concentrated on identifying themes and trends in the observations made. At the end of each delivery the group analysed data, compiled a summary, and devised an implementation plan. Normal work commitments often prevented the complete research group from meeting as often as planned. The results are firstly presented in terms of the success of the online learning community. Secondly a summary of the final collaborative analysis is provided.

### 5.2 General evidence regarding the success of the course

#### *First presentation of the course (February to June 2001)*

Learner retention and academic statistics

Description	Print	OLC
Registered	94	9
Completed	40 (42%)	7 (78%)
Average final mark	46%	63%

This table reflects statistics for the first semester of 2001 for both print delivery and the OLC. To form an idea of the success rate of the course, note the retention rates and average final marks. The print equivalent of the course succeeded in retaining only 42% of registered learners, while the online version secured a 78% retention rate. The final mark was also 17% higher than that of print-based learners. Considering that there was a significant difference in learner numbers, the group was of the opinion that the way the learning experience was designed and delivered had a tremendous effect on whether learners decided to remain in the course or drop out.

Retention rates for this online course might have been influenced positively by the procedure followed to inform students prior to registration regarding workload, commitment and technical aspects of the online learning community.

#### *Positive learning outcomes*

- Learner-centredness (learners appreciated the opportunity to contribute to the learning experience in various ways)
- Learner empowerment (they became confident to voice their opinions in public)

- Transformative learning (the learner changed as a person during the course)
- Critical reflection/self-reflection (learners reported having to reflect on their actions and contributions)
- Engaged learning (they reacted positively to being involved as compared to print isolation and passivity)
- A preferred learning environment (learners wanted to do more of their degree requirements via this mode)
- Self-imposed pressure and commitment (learners reported feeling the pressure and making the commitment in order to be successful)
- Worthwhile discussions (learners gained from others' opinions and could make their own contributions)
- Independent research (they reported doing a lot of independent research in order to contribute and do assignments)
- Exercising style and layout for academic writing (learners were able to exercise their writing skills for the academic environment)
- Facilitation and immediate support (learners appreciated receiving an almost immediate response to their enquiries)

### *Second presentation of the course (August to November 2001)*

Learner retention and academic statistics

Description	Print 1st	Print 2nd	OLC 1st	OLC 2nd
Registered	94	132	9	9
Completed	40 (42%)	27 (20%)	7 (78%)	7 (78%)
Final average	46%	40%	63%	69%

This table reflects statistics for the first and second semesters of 2001 for both print and the OLC. To gain an idea of the success rate of the course, note the retention rates and average final mark. The print equivalent of the course succeeded in retaining only 20% of registered learners (which is 22% lower than in the previous semester), while the online version secured a 78% retention rate (which is constant). The final mark was also 29% higher than that of print-based learners. The print-based experience is a cause for concern – it shows an increase in learner numbers but a drastic decline in the completion rate and an average mark that is 10% lower than the pass mark of 50%. The online group's average mark improved by 6%.

Retention rates for this online course might have been influenced positively by the procedure followed to inform students prior to registration regarding workload, commitment and technical aspects of the online learning community.

#### *Positive learning outcomes*

- A successful social and community-based learning environment (All learners reported that they benefited from others' experience and ideas,

that they formed friendships outside the course and that they received support.)

- Learner-centredness and empowerment (Learners were able to contribute their own views and gained confidence in expressing themselves in the forums.)
- Transformative learning (They are different people now – they have learned the value of teamwork and communication in order to reach objectives.)
- Critical thinking and deep learning (Learners provided evidence that they had to think critically about their contributions and replies – they were not prepared to contribute without thinking and doing research.)
- A scheduled learning environment (This helped them to organise their studies and other commitments.)
- Metacognitive development (They are thinking differently about how they want to learn – content provision and venue-linked examinations are not preferred.)
- Transcending the subject field and course topics (The boundaries of the course expanded through learner discussions, contributions and assignments.)

### 5.3 Final collaborative assessment

There is no doubt that this course, and similar projects, have to continue, but the print-based delivery mode appears to be problematic according to learner and staff feedback. Learners and facilitators compared their print-based experience with the online requirements and feedback in this regard provided support for the above statement. The group made a final collection of observations and recommendations:

#### *The learning experience*

##### Unisa's print-based delivery as problematic

- Anonymity and alienation within print-based study at Unisa are problematic from both the teaching and learning perspectives.
- Learners experienced print-based study as being about a textbook, a rush and an exam – which makes for a shallow learning experience.
- Learners do not see venue-linked written exams as a challenge, and multiple choice exams are viewed in the same light.
- According to learners compulsory assignments should be brought back into print study in order to provide more opportunity for communication and feedback – in general there is poor communication in print-based courses at Unisa.
- The varying course quality in one faculty is of concern – learners can take this course and other courses of inferior quality in the same faculty. In this regard there is inconsistency regarding the commitment to quality.
- Enquiring prospective learners found Unisa distant and inaccessible.

Learners who experienced print-based study at Unisa preferred the online learning community as a quality learning environment. The retention rates and academic statistics support this view. In addition learner feedback is about a very positive and powerful learning experience.

The social and community-based learning environment as learner-centred and empowering

- Learners reported that they benefited from the social learning environment in that they were able to share various perspectives and experiences as additional information and sources – the different backgrounds of participants also enriched the course.
- Bigger groups may increase the rich diversity of perspectives – when there are too few learners, those who ‘take a free ride’ have more of an impact in that they deprive other learners of their valuable experience and input.
- They reported that they enjoyed learning about the dynamics of online groups. They learned to work in a team and to communicate in the online environment.
- The OLC was a positive experience for the individual as learners were able to form friendships and were able to support one another – it is not an anonymous alienating environment.
- Although expressing oneself in text and in public is difficult, learners found the community or group learning environment empowering because they gained the confidence to make their voices heard
- Seeing the face of support and facilitation staff made the experience more real. The course developers should consider providing photos of learners as they have done with support staff.

Learners experienced the online learning community as a very intense and enriching learning environment. They were content as they were able to say their say and wanted to learn more. Learners experienced transformation as they became more confident ‘in public’, they reported viewing learning differently after the course, and they were able to use the communication skills they gained in their own work contexts. They had to do reflection and research before they could make contributions – this made the workload heavier, but they preferred this method of learning the print-based experience.

#### *Support and facilitation*

Although some learners reported sufficient support and feedback, there was still a strong indication that the facilitation did not meet the standards required by this type of learning environment.

- Some learners found dominating learners intimidating, and others wanted the facilitator to challenge their viewpoints in order to stimulate more vigorous discussions.
- Learners required a balanced tone from the facilitator – the one was too serious and the other was very bubbly. They did not expect a stereotypical

silent professor – the facilitator should be compassionate (“his heart should be with the learners”) and involved with the learners and their activities.

- Facilitating discussions online seemed to be a serious challenge. Some learners dominated early on in the course and others took a free ride. And then there were those who sent the discussions off at a tangent. Learners expected the facilitators to hold back initially and then redirect in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere.

In general the communicative environment of the course was experienced as very supportive and helpful. Learners saw the support staff as the outer boundaries of the group – they could call for assistance at any moment.

### *Content and design*

Learners found the content relevant for proper participation in the course. It was well structured – moving from competence of the individual to the learning organisation. But owing to the constructivist ideals of the learning experience, content provision came into conflict with learner input and application.

- Learners wanted the value of the content assessed to achieve more of a balance between theory and the academic views provided, and learners’ own research and input. They wanted more opportunity for practical application relevant to their own context and needs.
- The criteria and advice for completion of the assignments helped learners to master the writing and other presentation skills needed.
- Learners found the course extremely easy to navigate.
- They found the use of asynchronous communication technologies for the delivery of the course very convenient for continuous participation.
- The scheduled nature of the course helped learners to plan their studies and achieve better time management. They disciplined themselves to work continuously.

### *Technical problems*

Technical problems were mainly related to synchronous communication through Unisa and to learner access to the Internet.

- The chatroom was out of order at the start of both deliveries. Although it wasn’t incorporated as a primary communication technology, learners wanted to experiment with it.
- Internet access from work and home can present problems if not properly organised. Supervisors at work may not allow learners sufficient access, and access from home can be expensive because of local call costs. Some learners found themselves insufficiently Internet literate for general navigation, and experienced difficulty locating appropriate resources for research.

### *Learner administration*

Although most administrative departments were committed and accommodated the requirements of this course in every possible way, some aspects should be mentioned.

- The online registration process for new learners was unnecessarily slow. Learners also complained about registering in person – they found it an unpleasant experience.
- International learner fees should not be applicable to this type of course as no printed matter is sent out and no venue-linked examination is taken.
- The examination system should not indicate a final examination date for courses based on continuous assessment without a venue-linked examination.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This research project was undertaken in the light of the determination of the learning developer to carry the University's vision, and those of South Africa's educational and political structures, into the offices, heads and hearts of the academic, professional and support staff of this institution. Through this project teaching and support staff had the opportunity to critically assess their roles in learning development. They were able to generate understanding for the need to continuously refine practices and systems in order to contribute to quality distance learning. The role of the Unisa teacher was substantially challenged towards providing a more integrated tutoring service in a community environment. The pilot course proved to be successful in terms of design and development, and learners' final results and feedback also supported the use of this learning environment. During the development of the project substantial research went into a better analysis of Unisa's need for online learning provision. In addition, a more dynamic collaborative development process, aimed at change and improvement, was adopted by the team.

It is hoped that the recommendations will be accepted in a positive spirit and that they will contribute substantially towards making Unisa a distance learning institution of African and international preference. In this regard it is appropriate to conclude with our principal's message in which he states that only if all staff members work together as a team can Unisa realise its vision and potential to become an institution "where intellectual life, research and teaching would thrive" (Dr B Pityana, address to Senate, 21 May 2002).

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