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Some Critical Reflections On Open Distance Learning, With Particular Reference To Work-Integrated Learning

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Some Critical Reflections On Open Distance Learning, With Particular Reference To Work-Integrated Learning

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Abstract

The notion of 'openness' in terms like open distance learning (ODL) is sometimes rather carelessly used, for example in the work-integrated learning (WIL) of distance learners (such as the teaching practice of UNISA's education students, where schools and UNISA form a partnership). We indicate that there is very little 'openness' in this type of learning, and that ODL and WIL are in fact two irreconcilable concepts. Yet, when WIL is considered in relation to distance education (DE) there is no problem, because DE is a clear and generally understood concept, indicating a particular mode of education provision, within which WIL can be neatly and meaningfully accommodated. We conclude, also on the basis of empirical evidence, that WIL and DE (and not ODL) constitute the proven, established and ideal conceptual frameworks for the design and implementation of inter alia teaching practice (as WIL) in distance teacher training. In closing, we briefly reflect on the implications of our conclusion for institutional identity.

Keywords: appreciative theory, open learning, open distance learning, open distance learning institution, distance education, teaching practice, work-integrated learning

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Introduction

The terms *open learning* and *open distance learning* (UNISA, 2008) have acquired significant status in the ranks of distance education (DE) providers. This is not surprising, in view of the popularity of constructionist, student-centred perspectives on learning. In this vein, the 'openness' of learning denotes optimal student choice with regard to content, time, place, pace, instruction and assessment (Tait, 1994:27; Wei, 2010:49). So-called 'open universities' and 'open distance learning (ODL) institutions' have come to the fore – mostly from the ranks of higher education (HE) institutions which traditionally branded themselves specifically as DE providers. In the present era of massification of HE, the branding as 'open' has caught on for mainly political and marketing reasons. Not unexpectedly, this popularity sometimes results in the careless use of the notion *open* in all aspects and forms of distance learning. One such form of distance learning is work-integrated learning (WIL), for example in the teaching practice of UNISA's education students, where the university and schools are in partnerships (i.e. UNISA has to place education students at a specific school and during a specific time of the year.) As a result of a previous study on teaching practice as WIL (Du Plessis, 2011:60–70) we felt the need for some critical reflections on the 'openness' of teaching practice WIL of education students of UNISA, which brands itself as an ODL-institution. In a venture of crucial importance such as providing for teaching practice, conceptual rigidity is a *sine qua non*.

In the following sections, we firstly provide the conceptual framework for our work by elucidating the concepts *school-university partnership, DE*, *ODL* and *WIL*. We then attend to the application of WIL in the DE context, with brief reference to empirically investigated distance learner experiences of teaching practice (as WIL). We close with some critical reflections on the links between WIL, DE and ODL, and on the notion ODL itself.

Conceptual framework

For the purposes of our argument's development, the concepts *school-university partnerships, DE, ODL* and *WIL* are of key importance. These concepts are now briefly explained.

School-university partnership

There is general agreement among educators, politicians, and others concerned with education that schools alone are unable to successfully respond to

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the changing family structures and values, global economic climate, social pressures, and the societal demand for educational accountability (Robinson and Mastny, 1989). It is increasingly important that schools form sustainable partnerships with stakeholders if schools are to successfully complete their mission (Railsback and Brewster, 2003). The value of educational partnership is particularly evident in teaching practice of student teachers. The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC, 2008) has high expectations of this mode of learning – according to its requirements for teaching practice, the selection of schools, placement of students, training of mentors and mentoring during the teaching practice period and assessment of students' competence and feedback to the university are in constant need of improvement. Such improvements can only be effectively made through sound educational partnerships.

In the twenty-first century, schools are interactive and essential components of an interactive network of social institutions, creating a seamless web of global sustainability. Sustainability requires facing problems by focusing on possibilities through collaboration, cooperation, and commitment to participate in the planning, implementing, and assessment process. Moreover, it requires common agreement on the indicators that assess whether the involved partners are healthier as a result of the partnership (Leibman and El-Eini, 1996).

Healthy, sustainable relationships are at the core of creating effective partnerships between the school and stakeholders (Brewster and Railsback, 2003). Partner stakeholders respect each others' values and bring competence and integrity to the partnership (Bryk and Schneider, 2002).

The health and sustainability of partnerships can be effectively determined through appreciative inquiry. Appreciative inquiry's basic premise is to focus on organisational strengths through a collaborative approach in identifying an organisation's and its members' potential. The approach thus appreciates the good that is inherent in an organisation in envisioning what might be, and by collaboratively co-constructing a path to achieving and sustaining the organisations' vision (Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2003). Facilitating the formation of partnerships is the key ingredient in this asset-based approach. From an inter-organisational and research perspective, appreciative inquiry approaches the partnership from an affirmative focus, seeking to discover what gives life to organisations and sustains their growth (Cooperrider and Whitney, 1999). Thus, approaching school-university partnerships from an appreciative inquiry theoretical perspective creates an environment for building trust, affirming partnership members, increasing bridging capital, and addressing challenges as part of a life sustaining growth experience.

It must be noted that appreciative inquiry is inherently a research activity. Through the application of appreciative inquiry in action research projects, school-university partnerships can be encouraged and developed. Action researchers who apply appreciative inquiry are participative in nature. They recognise that people learn collaboratively by adapting their knowledge to their experiences (Allen, 2002). Lewin argued that involvement in the organisation was important so that one could understand the change that was occurring (Schmuck and Schmuck, 2004). The implications of interacting with the organisation provides the researchers with a profound opportunity that if one wanted to change the system, one had to first participate in the system as a partner. A willingness to become involved in the system is the first step in forming working partnerships between researchers and schools.

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Distance education

From its earliest conceptions, DE has always been conceptualised from the 'provider' perspective, yet with features of flexibility and supportive communication (Van der Merwe, 2011). The theory of Wedemeyer (1981) emphasises the application of technology for promoting democracy and independent study through extended access and interactive communication. Holmberg (1989) distinguishes the guided conversation character of DE, manifesting in various forms of study at all levels so as to facilitate learning. Although there is mostly no direct contact, students benefit from the conversation contained in pre-produced courses, and from interactive communication with their lecturers. Moore (1993) highlights the maintenance of a transactional balance between the variables of dialogue, structure and learner autonomy. The transactional balance is dependent on proper communications media, the design of courses, the selection and training of lecturers, and the learning styles of students. Peters (2008) emphasises the principles of industrial organisation whereby technology enables large numbers of students to access university study due to online learning possibilities in a knowledge-based economy characterised by a digital environment.

It is clear that DE is unthinkable without flexibility. This aspect is clearly implied in a typical institutional policy description of DE: 'Distance education is a set of methods or processes for teaching a diverse range of students located at different places and physically separated from the learning institution, their tutors, as well as other students' (UNISA, 2008:1).

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Open distance learning

The world-wide post-modern educational paradigm shift from provision thinking to student-centred thinking, led to a sharp increase in the popularity of the 'open learning' concept. In this perspective on learning, the learner decides on *inter alia* the following (Mackintosh, Waghid and Van Niekerk, 1997:166–169): To learn or not to learn; what to learn; how to learn; where to learn; when to learn; the pace of learning; who to go to for assistance; how to evaluate what has been learned, and what to do next. 'At the heart of open learning is learner choice: putting decisions about learning into the hands of the learners themselves' (Wei, 2010:48). Holmberg (1989:17) addresses a popular misconception by emphasising that open learning is not synonymous with DE. Any educational institution (on the whole spectrum from contact to distance teaching) can offer open learning, 'as long as they take measures to make their educational programmes more open and flexible as regards time, place, courses, methods, ideas and people' (Wei, 2010:48).

Yet, the concept *open learning* gained a firm foothold particularly in the realm of DE, resulting in the extended concept *ODL*. ODL thus refers to DE students' choice with regard to the content, time, place, and pace of learning, method of instruction and nature of assessment. In its ideal form, ODL suggests that the provisioning for multi-learners, with multi-modes, by multimedia, at multi-levels, and for multi-purposes, is aligned with cognisance of the needs of a knowledge-based society, with due emphasis on diversity encompassing the range of learner characteristics, learning conditions and learning environments (Van der Merwe, 2011). This scope of student-centeredness is impressive and attractive, and not surprisingly, ODL has become the 'hype' to the extent that most recognised DE institutions wish to be viewed and accepted as 'ODL institutions' (as is apparent, for example, from the general use of the term in UNISA's internal and external communication).

Work-integrated learning

WIL is a defining element of a holistic educational strategy known as cooperative education, which advocates the formal integration of structured real-life experiences (workplace or community service) into the overall programme curriculum. It is a departure point for applied learning that focuses on work experience under supervision and/or mentorship in the workplace. It is a learning programme that focuses on the application of theory in an authentic, work-based context (Mbango, 2009).

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WIL is thus a distinct form of learning experience, which incorporates the workplace setting as a component of learning (Bennet, 2005:3). Students learn from authentic work experiences and are required to produce evidence of such learning in the form of portfolios, projects, reports, logbooks, applied assignments and/or presentations to panels for evaluation purposes. Some of the fundamental features of WIL are the following:

- The appropriate vocational community is a key role player in the curriculum decision-making process.
- The learning outcomes determined during the curriculum development process are translated into WIL guidelines for the student and the workplace mentor. The learning materials include assessment tasks, criteria, and so on.
- The university actively engages in marketing cooperative education in order to secure sufficient and suitable WIL placement opportunities. Learner support staff further facilitates the placement of unemployed students.
- The university mentors individual students, and plans and enters into contracts with institutions.
- The university manages the regular and systematic *in situ* monitoring and assessment of WIL, and remains responsible for verifying the attainment of the predetermined WIL outcomes by individual students.

For learning to come from the experience of participating in WIL activities, these activities, according to Bennet (2005:5), must provide a meaningful experience that is intended and accredited by the institution.

The aims of WIL are:

- to expose students to the real world of the workplace while studying;
- to assist students to gain general work experience in a professional work environment;
- to help students develop a range of valuable generic skills; and
- to make the transition from student to employee easier (Mbango, 2009).

In the realm of teacher training, WIL is ideal in preparing the student to become an effective teacher because, according to Milne (2005:5), the student interacts with the leadership, staff, learners and other role players during practical teaching. Students learn by observing, participating, intervening

in and influencing what is taking place. Incorporating all of these features optimally in teaching practice can constitute pertinent challenges, particularly in the DE context.

Work-integrated learning in the distance education context

Work-integrated learning as part of distance education

As part of the flexibility of DE, WIL has always been viewed as an accepted, even highly desirable part of the DE curriculum. It is thus not surprising that an established DE institution like UNISA has a dedicated policy on experiential learning, inclusive of WIL (UNISA, 2011). In the preamble to this policy, experiential learning is described as

> *... the process of making meaning from direct experience and an interplay between theory and practice. It is learning through reflection on doing. Experiential learning as an educational method facilitates the exposure of students to realistic experiences and important contextual characteristics of relevant disciplines*. (UNISA, 2011:1)

The policy (UNISA, 2011) states that experiential learning can include WIL, and it denotes the integral part which the DE institution plays in the latter in the following description: 'WIL means educational activities that integrate theory and practice in work-based contexts. These activities are assessed by the university and contribute to exit-level outcomes of a qualification'.

Several studies on teacher training through DE reveal that the organisation of practice teaching (i.e. WIL) for teacher trainees presents both logistical and educational challenges (Aldridge, Fraser and Ntuli, 2009:147). Problems facing practical teaching via DE include the placing of students at approved schools, mentoring and supervising them during school visits, building relationships with all stakeholders, assessment and feedback. One of the biggest problems for DE, particularly in a developing country, is overcoming transactional distance. Moore (1993) defined *transactional distance* as 'a psychological and communications space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner' (Gorsky and Caspi, 2005:1). In practical terms, such a transactional gap can exist between students and the institution, between students and lecturers/tutors, between students and courseware and between student and student.

Student experiences of WIL in the DE context are self-evidently a valuable source of information in determining the extent of this transactional gap in the school-university partnership. The questions are: To what extent is WIL really effective in the DE context, and if the extent is indeed significant, what are the pertinent opportunities

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and challenges? Directly related to teaching practice, the question is: What are the students' views on teaching practice in the DE context, what problems do they experience, and to what extent can teaching practice challenges in a distance learning context be overcome?

In the following section, we provide answers to these questions with reference to the findings of an empirical research project (Du Plessis, 2011:60–70).

Student experiences of teaching practice (as work-integrated learning) in distance education context

The research project (Du Plessis, 2011:60–70) involved a qualitative research approach, in the interest of in-depth probing of students' views and perspectives on their teaching practice as WIL. Purposive sampling was used to select 40 students enrolled for teaching practice modules in the B.Ed. and PGCE programmes at UNISA. The students purposively selected for the research were from different schools, namely from multicultural, single-culture, parallel-medium, dual-medium and single-language schools. Some students were from suburbs, some from rural areas and some from city centres. Data were gathered using qualitative research interviews. The biographical information of the students was as follows: From the 40 students, 37.5% were male and 62.5% were female students. The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 40+. The participants were also representative of different cultural groups. The ethical measures to which the researcher adhered included informed consent from the participants. Trustworthiness was established by using verification measures as ways to guard against biases in the findings, for instance by comparing the responses received in order to identify trends or patterns. Confidentiality was also ensured by safeguarding participants' anonymity.

The intention was to elicit the students' views on teaching practice and problems they experience while doing their teaching practice. The data yielded useful information on the role of UNISA, the school and the student. The data-analyses highlighted two pertinent aspects of teaching practice, namely study material and school context. For the purpose of this research, the focus will be on school context only, in accordance with our theoretical framework on school-university partnership.

Regarding the schools as WIL (teaching practice) partners, the following responses were given by students:

Students were welcomed by school principals and received all the required support. One student in a rural well-resourced single-medium high school said

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that she felt totally involved in the school – 'just like part of the school'. One student in a well-resourced high school said: 'Practical experience (standing in front of a class) gives you an understanding of the reality of teaching'. One student placed in a well-resourced private school, commented on an excellent, well-established team that gave him support through the beginning stages as well as material for lesson plans. Most of the students found the schools very supportive: they felt part of the school and it was exhilarating for them to be involved in practical teaching. Another student, a 34-year-old male from a private well-resourced school testified that the teaching practice in schools worked well: 'I can fill a notepad because there was exciting things that happen, or different things that happen, different situations come up which is really what is fascinating about the whole teaching environment which is so dynamic, like it changes all the time and you never know what is going to come round the corner next.'

Teachers were found to be accommodating and helpful in general, although some students felt that they had been thrown into the deep end. Some students had a range of teachers and were exposed to various teaching approaches. Most of the students were exposed to the full spectrum of teaching activities and were treated as true colleagues. Students felt that most schools were professional, with good resources like computers, whiteboards and access to the internet, science laboratories, and textbooks for teachers and learners. All the same, a minority of students felt unwelcome and sensed that teachers at schools felt threatened by them as students. Some teachers were not willing to complete assessment forms or evaluate lessons presented by the students. One student indicated that schools need to spell out their expectations of students. The responsibility of the school should also be made clearer. Students furthermore indicated that the placement of students at schools is problematic, because not all the schools offer all the subjects. Sometimes students receive placement letters too late to fit their teaching practice into a specific time period.

Although schools as WIL partners are usually willing to accept UNISA students for their teaching practice, it is very difficult to arrange for teaching practice at any given time. WIL is thus not flexible regarding time. Schools can accommodate students only during specific times, and this clearly contradicts with ODL ideals.

Summative remarks

From the empirical evidence it was clear that problems in teaching practice (as WIL) in the DE context can all be linked to lack of proper information and

clear guidelines. Importantly, however, the empirical evidence was distinctly positive and provided a clear verdict that teaching practice (as WIL) can indeed function successfully in the DE context, and specifically so if the following requirements are heeded to:

- Practical classroom needs are met.
- Teaching practice is intentional, organised and accredited.
- The placement, orientation and coaching of the student is effectively overseen.
- A constructive working environment is provided.
- There is open communication between the teaching practice co-ordinator and the student on any work-related issues involving the student.
- Work assessment forms on the student's performance are comprehensively completed.
- There are effective measures to ensure that students develop a truly integrated approach to learning through a combination of academic and work-related activities.
- The partnership between the school and UNISA is stipulated.

Importantly, all of these requirements point to DE provided WIL (as teaching practice) as a local, well-planned, highly structured and meticulously scheduled mode of learning, with hardly any nuances of 'openness' in the sense of being student-driven.

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Discussion

While WIL makes perfect sense in a DE setting, as already pointed out, the question is: Can WIL (as a 'closed', highly structured mode of learning) fit into the highly popular educational wrapper of ODL? Stated differently: Can OL and ODL conceptually incorporate WIL (by implication: teaching practice)? Bluntly phrased: Can an 'ODL institution' accommodate WIL? In our view, the answers to these questions are important for the trustworthiness of institutional and student identities, and the ensuing validity of students' and institutions' perceptions and expectations regarding 'open learning'.

Du Plessis's (2011:60–70) study of the key features and practical experiences of WIL in the DE context has brought us to the realisation that

the concept ODL has restricted application. It is clear from empirical evidence that WIL has highly structured, organised and scheduled features, which do not conform to the essence of ODL. The distinctive features of ODL and WIL have the following significant implications for institutional and student identities:

Frankly stated, during the WIL part of their learning, students of an ODL institution cannot be regarded as 'ODL students'. As pointed out, schools as partners can only accommodate students during specific times of the year. Viewing WIL participants as 'open' distance learners thus constitutes an untenable conceptual anomaly. Such anomaly is, however, absent when WIL is contemplated and practised in the flexible provider mode of DE (i.e. without undue promises and expectations about the 'openness' of learning).

Regarding institutional identity, a DE institution's branding as 'ODL institution' should be educationally responsible. The description suggests an institution that optimally accommodates distance students' choice in learning matters. If an institution cannot guarantee and provide such student-driven openness in its distance learning offerings, as evident from the institutions formal processes, systems and procedures (and students' complaints about these), it is unacceptable for such an institution to refer to itself as an 'ODL institution'. Nor is it acceptable to deviate from the crux of open learning, and use, as UNISA does (UNISA, 2008:1) a definition of ODL which is, in effect, a definition of best practice in DE:

> [ODL is] *a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational, and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and courseware and student and peers. Open distance learning focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision, student-centeredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed.*

Our considerations about the WIL-ODL anomaly sensitised us to a serious ethical concern. Like churches, educational institutions operate specifically in the realm of values and morality, and are thus particularly obliged towards rigorous self-reflection and undiluted honesty about real institutional identity, in order to avoid false learner and societal expectations about the institution. Taking the example of UNISA: Is this really an 'ODL institution', as it likes to refer to itself? Which of the 'open learning' criteria does UNISA meet to a satisfactory extent? Even if UNISA succeeds in overcoming the present huge challenge of successfully aligning all the different processes, systems

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and procedures (Prinsloo, 2011) in the interest of optimal service delivery, the idea of UNISA ever reaching the stage of 'student choice in content, time, place, pace of learning, method of instruction and nature of assessment' seems fictitious for many practical, societal and economic reasons. With reference to Garrison and Shale (1989) and Moore (1993), Wei (2010:49) indicates convincingly that the ODL notion may not be sustainable in under-developed and developing economic environments, for reasons of lacking professional and financial capacity:

> So present-day ODL might undermine the two most distinguishing features of distance education: distance education as a means of extending access to education to those who might otherwise be excluded from an educational experience; and as delivering more educational opportunities to more people than ever before, and to do so at lower average cost.

Following on the above, a pertinent question remains: Why should a well-established DE institution like UNISA aspire to be an 'ODL institution'? Is this really what the students want? From our experience, we assume that students first and foremost expect high-quality service delivery (for which, in earlier days, UNISA earned a world class reputation as DE institution). We anticipate the students' plea to be: *Give us strong, efficient and effective distance education, and in our work and living spaces, we will define the openness of our learning ourselves.*

Lastly, a remark about the term *open university.* This well-established concept in higher education is free from the conceptual tangles which the term 'ODL institution' creates, and denotes a university which should serve an entire country with optimal access to educational opportunities, specifically aimed at those who, for whatever reasons, cannot attend other universities. An open university has the following four key functions (Gaskell, 2008:83; Tait, 2008:7), and an institution like UNISA answers to each of them: building capacity, providing opportunities and social justice for individuals, changing the higher education system, and nation-building. WIL can and should be inherent in these features.

Restating the impetus that lead to this article, we are strongly of the view that DE and WIL constitute the proven, established and ideal conceptual frameworks for the design and implementation of teaching practice in the College of Education at UNISA. We likewise believe that the terms *ODL* and *ODL institution* are in urgent need of continued, rigorous conceptual and practical scrutiny.

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