



ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 48, 16 FEBRUARY 2011

IN THIS ISSUE:

- 1 **ODL Podcast 3: Update**
- 2 *South African users prefer the mobile internet*
- 3 *Sex, lies and videotape*
- 4 *Some sobering thoughts on the state (and future) of humanity – John Gray*
- 5 *Mumbo jumbo 5: Posting previous exam papers on myUnisa devalues Unisa's qualifications*
- 6 *Important upcoming ODL events*
- 7 *The new face of tutoring at Unisa*
- 8 *ODL Repository and blog*

1 **ODL Podcast 3: Update**



The podcast server has become unavailable for a while and the podcast recorded for this week will therefore stand over. It is normal for these teething problems to happen and I really do appreciate the support we receive from ICT with regard to institutionalising the use of audio podcasts.

Thank you for all of the feedback I received on the podcasts of last week!

2 **SOUTH AFRICAN USERS PREFER THE MOBILE INTERNET**

NEWS FLASH

Prof David Levey (Department of English) sent me the following [link](#) to an article with some interesting statistics. I quote:

Thirty-nine percent of urban South Africans and 27 percent of rural users over the age of 16 were now browsing the internet on their phones, it found in its Mobility 2011 research project, backed by First National Bank. The study represented about 20 million South Africans aged 16 and above, which meant that at least six million South Africans now had internet access on their phones, it said. World Wide Worx MD Arthur Goldstuck said MXit was the most popular service on cell phones and was used by 24 percent of cell phone users, while Facebook attracted 22 percent of cell phone users. [...]

The study also found an increase in e-mail usage by rural cell phone users. “The fact that e-mail usage by rural cell phone users was almost non-existent a year before means the 12 percent penetration reported for 2010 indicates mobile e-mail becoming a mainstream tool across the population,” said Goldstuck. [...] Male usage outpaced that of female, at 56 percent compared to 44 percent.

For the full article follow the [link](#).

3 *SEX, LIES AND VIDEOTAPE*

Don’t worry; this section does not have an age restriction... (Apologies if you are disappointed...).

On Monday’s CHS College forum on E-Learning, one of the concerns raised about Unisa’s commitment to optimise the affordances of technology was the fact that the Internet, and using the affordances of technology *is not neutral*. I don’t think most educators I know would claim that it is neutral, but it is good to be continuously reminded that any technology is used in the service of some ideology or Meta or grand narrative.

Let us remember that this is true of *all* technologies throughout the existence of humankind. *There was never a neutral technology*. There was never a technology that was *only* used for serving justice and compassion. Technology, whether the oral traditions and rock paintings in Africa, or the early crude tools, were always used by the dominant to sustain and increase their power base. Advances in technology have always been used to exercise dominion over fellow humans, beast and nature. The thousands extinct species are silenced witnesses to this fact.

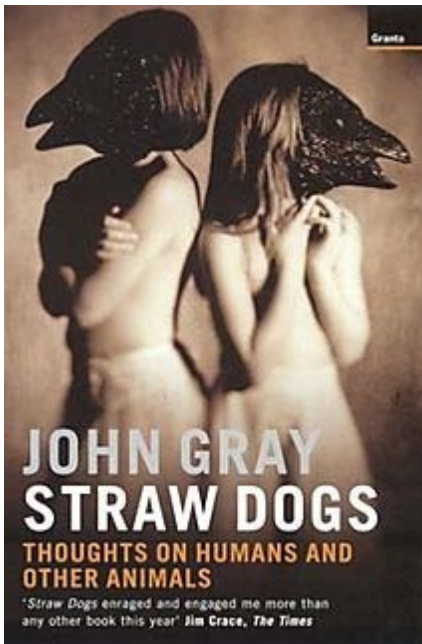
Even our current study materials and the prescribed text books we so meticulously chose and prescribe, are in service of an ideological framework... Let us *never* forget this.

Let us never forget the role radio and film played in the Holocaust. Let us never forget the atomic bombs that were dropped on civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Let us never forget the role radio played in the genocide in Rwanda. Let us never forget the role radio and newspapers played in the Apartheid years – whether in service of Apartheid or the struggle. Let us never forget how radio, television and the Internet are currently used to spread parasitic consumerism and capitalism.

But let us *also* celebrate the role Web 2.0 technologies played in the recent democratisation of Egypt and the processes set in motion in other places. No wonder the authorities in several countries have closed or curtailed Internet access and mobile networks.

So yes, the affordances of new technologies that we would like to harness for the sake of teaching at Unisa can also be used to sell sex and lies. But that also applies to our materials...

4 SOME SOBERING THOUGHTS ON THE STATE (AND FUTURE) OF HUMANITY – JOHN GRAY



While we survived another state of the nation address (and all its claims and promises), John Gray's book "Straw Dogs. Thoughts on humans and other animals" (2002) is a tour d' force in pointed interrogation of the state of humanity. And maybe Unisa with its vision namely to be "the African university in the service of humanity" needs to take note...

For those of the Unisa community who believes in a "higher purpose" for humanity and the notion of humanity's increasing progress, may find reading Gray (2002) either a "wake-up" call or they may disengage very early in the book. You don't have to agree with him, but a number of things Gray (2002) moots, are really thought-provoking.

In the Foreword to his book, Gray (2002: xiii) already stakes a number of claims such as that there is no overall meaning in history. History is only "... a series of cycles", and any hope on progress (that includes not only a growth in scientific knowledge but also in ethics), is an illusion (2002: xiv). *If there is therefore no hope in progress, how are we to live?*

The answer also does not lie in political action because political action has become the "surrogate for salvation. ... no political project can deliver humanity from its natural condition" (2002:xv). Gray (2002: xv) ends his Foreword with the very sobering claim: "Humans cannot save the world, but this is no reason for despair. It does not need saving." The human project, throughout the ages, has used philosophy, religion and even science trying to desperately deny this contingency (Gray 2002:1 quoting Jacques Monod).

Any hope that things will be better in future, Gray (2002:4) claims, is groundless. "For though human knowledge will very likely continue to grow and with it human power, the human animal will stay the same: a highly inventive species that is also one of the most predatory and destructive". The current overpopulation the earth experiences is the result of "the evolutionary success of an exceptionally rapacious primate" or "homo sapiens" (2002:7). According to Gray (2002:12) 'humanity' as such does not exist. "There are only humans, driven by conflicting needs and illusions, and subject to every kind of infirmity of will and judgment". The worst crimes in the history of humans on earth were made possible by progress in scientific knowledge. While technological progress will continue, the "insoluble" problem of the frailty of human nature will also continue (2002:15). A leitmotif in this work by Gray, is his claim that the "humanist gulf between ourselves and other animals is an aberration".

A particularly sobering question Gray (2002:17) raises is the following: “What could be more hopeless than placing the Earth in the charge of this exceptionally destructive species?”

Nothing and no-one escapes Gray’s (2002) scathing scrutiny. While religious fundamentalists “see themselves as having remedies for the maladies of the modern world... they are symptoms of the disease they pretend to cure” (2002:18). Even the increases in knowledge are not the remedy we drastically need. “The uses of knowledge will always be as shifting and crooked as humans are themselves. Humans use what they know to meet their most urgent needs – even if the result is ruin” (2002:28). Humans should realise, sooner than later, that we live “on the boundary of an alien world; a world that is deaf to his (sic) music and as indifferent to his hopes as it is to his suffering and his crimes” (2002:30).

His choice of “Straw dogs” as title for his book is explained as follows in reference to *Tao Te Ching*: “In ancient Chinese rituals, straw dogs were used as offerings to the gods. During the ritual they were treated as offerings to the gods. When it was over and they were no longer needed they were trampled on and tossed aside” (2002:33-34). In the same way, humans will be “trampled on and tossed aside” if they disturb the balance of the Earth (2002:34).

What was particularly enlightening for me personally, was Gray’s exploration of the philosophy of Schopenhauer as heuristic for answering the question on how and what “sense can we make of our lives?” (2002:38). Part of this sense-making exercise is the looking for the untruths we could rid ourselves of and those which we cannot do without (2002:83).

It is Gray’s (2002:90 et seq.) scrutiny of morality that really made me to gasp in surprise. Through a number of very disturbing examples, Gray points to his belief that morality is mostly understood, as a convenience “to be relied upon only in normal times” (2002:90). The history of humans provides ample examples of how frail our concept (and practice) of morality actually is. Gray (2002:91) states: “Genocide is as human as art or prayer” (2002:91) and that humans “are weapon-making animals with an unquenchable fondness for killing” (2002:92).

There are many such examples. One example is the “good Christian men and women who colonised Tasmania [who] did not let their deep belief in the sanctity of human life stand in the way of their drive for *Lebensraum*” (2002:92). Gray moots his opinion that progress “and mass murder run in tandem... As the hope for a better world has grown, so has mass murder” (2002:96). It was Gray’s (2002:96-97) exploration of the killing of Mary Turner – a black women in her eight month of pregnancy – who was murdered by a group of white men, women and children - that left me nauseous. It reminded me of the accounts during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) post 1994 of how humans turned onto one another like animals in the service of political ideals. Whether we think about the murders done by Vlakplaas operatives, or the necklacing of ‘impimpis’ - South Africa’s history is a case in point of homo sapiens in action. And no TRC, Moral regeneration movement or for that matter any religion can salvage us from ourselves...

And if Gray (2002:103) is correct, we should not underestimate the vileness in human nature. He warns: “Ideas of justice are as timeless as fashions in hats (2002:103).

It was Gray’s (2002:109 et seq.) exploration of the “fetish of choice” that made me think of last week’s communiqué section on the “agency” of our students. Gray (2002:109-110) states:

We are not authors of our lives; we are not even part-authors of the events that mark us most deeply. Nearly everything that is most important in our lives is unchosen. The time and place we are born, our parents, the first language we speak – these are chance, not choice. It is the casual drift of things that shapes our most fateful relationships. The life of each of us is a chapter of accidents.

This brings him to the point to state that personal “autonomy is the work of our imagination, not the way we live” (2002:110). The “cult of choice” is a way we improvise our lives, a mark of our “unfreedom”.

In reflecting on death, Gray (2002:131) posits the idea that our abject clinging to life is what distinguishes humans from animals and that scientific endeavors to conquer death is to deliver to us what religions always promised us namely “freedom from fate and chance” (2002:139). And while we wait for science to conquer death, we live longer and become more bored as we grow older (2002:163) forever seeking new pleasures and excitement increasingly use war “as play” (2002:182).

So what does it mean if Unisa is “the African university in the service of humanity?” What does it mean to be a graduate of this great institution?

Reading Gray (2002) left me uneasy with my own hopes for education to contribute to a more just and compassionate society... I am not sure I believe that education can make a difference to the future of homo sapiens as an “exceptionally rapacious primate”. Will our statement on graduateness be able to stem the tide? What type of curricula will do?

5 MUMBO JUMBO 4: POSTING PREVIOUS EXAM PAPERS ON MYUNISA DEVALUES UNISA’S QUALIFICATIONS

In the previous communiqués we started to explore some of the general assumptions and often unquestioned beliefs regarding teaching and learning at Unisa. This week I want to explore the whole purpose of posting previous year’s exam papers on *myUnisa*. *Does it not devalue our qualifications?* What happens when students have access to ALL our previous papers – does it mean that we will run out of questions to ask? If students work out eight (or more) previous exam papers have they learned? Have we taught? There is the notion in some of the Mid-Eastern languages that if students have not learned, we have not taught... So where does it leave us with regard to the posting of previous exam papers?

It is good international practice in ODL to provide students with enough opportunities to prepare themselves for the examination. At the Open University, every module has at least one mock exam paper included in the learning materials *with* the memorandum to that mock examination paper. The pedagogical rationale for this is that the format and content of the examination should not come as a surprise to students. We don't want to catch them out. *We want to discover what they know and can do.* We want them to discover for themselves what they know and what they have not yet grasped. Often in an examination, this knowledge comes too late for students. The memoranda at the Open University do not contain the answers to the mock exam paper, but rather very informative guidelines and advice on how to approach questions and what to look out for. The mock exam paper is therefore a *teaching* opportunity and not a dumping of information.

In the context of Unisa, we are compelled through the *Access to Information Act* to provide students with previous years' examination papers. And a brief search on the Internet provides ample examples of Unisa exam papers being sold to those willing to pay and eager to know. So providing these papers for free ensures not only compliance to legislation but also prevents Unisa students from being exploited. But it does raise another issue namely the purpose of working through previous examination papers. To what extent does it increase students' learning or does it allow them with an often false sense of self-assurance?

My personal opinion is that working through previous examination papers *may* contribute to students' learning, though my suspicion is that it is often in service of very short-term memory. Unfortunately many of our examination papers only test short-term memory and do not really require students to critically engage with issues and formulate opinions (yes, even on first year level...). I realise that lecturers set examination papers amidst of many other duties such as the updating of tutorial letters, revision of study materials, updating of prescribed materials, recommended reading lists, and so forth. But how can we support lecturers to have enough time and resources to really engage with formative and summative assessment designs? How can we support lecturers so that they can really experiment with alternative assessment practices and where appropriate and possible, with non-venue based examinations?

If it was not for the legislation, I would have opted to follow the model of the Open University in which students receive one or two mock examinations with memoranda to prepare them for the examination. Maybe there is something we can take from this example? Is the reason why students work through one examination paper after the other one because they are trying to look for a pattern in our thinking so that they can predict the next paper? What if we make our patterns obvious and transparent by providing students with carefully thought-through memoranda accompanying a mock or previous examination paper?

If we can get students so far as to really engage with the reasons why we include certain questions, they may be more eager to prepare accordingly and not (necessarily) look for another and yet another example?

And lastly, if we can use and integrate the many activities we creatively add in our study materials and on our online discussion forums into formative and summative assessment opportunities, we may actually use assessment to teach...

Maybe there is something in the notion of “if they have not learned, we have not taught”?

6 **IMPORTANT UPCOMING ODL EVENTS**

Tuesday 1 March 2011 (Dr Miriam Makeba Concert Hall, 11:00-13:00):

ODL Forum: The Framework for a Team Approach in Curriculum and Learning Development. At this event we will engage with the approved Framework and investigate the implications for its implementation. Don't miss this opportunity!

Monday 7 March 2011 (Senate Hall, 10:00-12:00): *ODL Forum - Using portfolios as alternative assessment practice.* During this event we will explore current practices and interrogate the challenges and opportunities of using portfolios as formative and summative assessment opportunity.

Tuesday 8 March 2011 (Senate Hall, 11:00-13:00): *ODL Forum – Social technologies: Noah's ark or Pandora's Box?* As more and more lecturers are using various social media platforms (eg Facebook, Ning, Twitter, etc) there is huge potential to either increase the quality of teaching or potential for a disaster... Join us for a critical exploration of the issue.

Thursday 17 March 2011 (Senate Hall, 09:00-13:00): The “Second celebration of innovation in teaching and learning”. We would like to celebrate examples of innovation in teaching and learning (including student support, administration, etc) at Unisa. Please feel free to send me (prinsp@unisa.ac.za) the names of possible participants?



7 **THE NEW FACE OF TUTORING AT UNISA**

While no one disputes the excellent work many face-to-face tutors do in enhancing students' chances of success, an equally undisputed fact is that the majority of students don't make use of this service for a number of reasons.

Two of the reasons are the fact that many (more than half) of our students are employed and we all know how precious a weekend is to catch up with family life and domestic issues. The other reason is that we will never be able to reach out physically to all students wherever they are and whenever they have an opportunity to engage with us and their studies. But there are three major developments that will change the face of tutoring at Unisa forever.

In End-User computer with its 33 000 students in 2011, E-tutors (in the form of Distance Learning Aides) play a crucial role in supporting students. In the Science Foundation Project E-Tutors will from this year onwards offer telematic and e-support to students in tandem with face-to-face support.

The E-Tutor ODL pilot project in CEMS in Financial Accounting (ACN203-S) is however noteworthy. It will be a watershed moment in Unisa's history not because of student numbers (there are 'only' 3 000 students in the module), but the pilot will also be the first time that the student tracking system and student profiling will be piloted in a module, and the pilot will provide the foundation for the standardisation of the contracts and procedures for all independent contractors involved in teaching and learning. The project also foresees a very specific role of the E-tutor who will make proactive contact with students on a weekly basis, be available three weekday evenings from 18:00-21:00, respond to a "please call me" from students and provide e-mail support whenever they can. It will also challenge us to find tutors on a ratio of 1:50 with the specific academic background to support students on a second-year level. The pilot will roll out in the second semester of 2011 and the practice of E-tutors will then be increasingly institutionalised in Unisa till every student has access to an E-tutor by 2015.

We wish the team all of the best!

8 ODL REPOSITORY AND BLOG

All the ODL task team reports, the overview of the recommendations of the STLSC and other ODL documents are available on the [Unisa Library's Institutional Repository](#). The repository is updated on a regular basis and if you register on the repository, you will get notifications of any new uploads.

Drafted by Dr Paul Prinsloo

ODL Coordinator, Office of the Vice-Principal: Academic & Research, Unisa
15 February 2011

+27 (0) 12 4293683 (office)

+27 (0) 823954113 (mobile)

prinsp@unisa.ac.za

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this ODL Communiqué represent my personal viewpoints and do not represent the viewpoint of any other member of the Unisa community.