

# PROGRESSIO



## The effect of organisational culture, discourse and occupational identity on engagement in distance delivery

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### **Abstract**

This discussion reflects on the role of discourse and identity in industrialised distance delivery in South Africa. The nature and economies of such a production and delivery environment demand a strong accent on scalability that in turn affects 'human services' in the learning experience. The development and sustenance of such an educational scenario is partly dependent on the apparent 'willingness' of educators to 'submit' to non-engagement that is contra the basic calling of the profession. The author exposes the two different repetitive repertoires of discourse that contribute to this forced occupational identity.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Recently published targets and criteria based on bad practice in distance education (DE) (SAIDE 2003a and b) and a report on the current state of DE nationally (CHE 2004) highlight a lack of communication and support for learners. It is evident that there is a growing absence of engagement (interaction and communication) in the learning experience. This, in turn, reflects negatively on the quality of DE. Prasad and Mills (1997, 5) refer to a quilt that has been torn, cracks that have begun to appear in the mosaic, and a rainbow that has been twisted out of shape. What is causing this state of affairs that goes against good practice in DE?

### **Organisational culture**

Organisational culture can be described as the attitudes, experiences, beliefs and values of an organisation (Bradfield 2006). Organisational culture is 'achieved' as the organisation evolves and adapts to external and internal challenges. The processes and coping mechanisms that 'worked' or have been 'successful' in the continuous challenge to adapt become accepted as valid, and new members who join the organisation are taught to react in the same way. They come to think of and justify their actions in terms of the inherited culture.

Organisational values may not be visible to employees even though they are expressed in practice. In an attempt to adapt practices to restrictive systems and cope with challenges, employees develop a unique reasoning and identity. This deep-rooted process, which can be very difficult to change, can have a profound effect on the authentic goals and the true *raison d'être* of an organisation. Mass distance delivery institutions face unique challenges as they try to replicate the classroom via a distance for thousands of learners, and in this effort they adopt unique systems and practices. What can happen to the teaching staff in this scenario? How do they view their roles and justify their practices?

### **Illusive economies**

DE is often assessed positively for its supposed ability to introduce scale and desirable economies. But this label may be at the heart of numerous problems – Perraton and Huelsmann (1998, 20) discuss the perceived inferiority of DE in that it lacks human contact and therefore the essence of good education (tutoring and counselling). DE appears to be inefficient because many programmes have had high drop-out rates, leading to dissatisfied learners and costs per graduate that are much higher than costs per learner. These authors then state that 'systems with high dropout rates can also make money – if many are called but few are taught, expenditure on tutors' fees is minimized'. They warn that the dissemination of stand-alone materials without tutoring and counselling that match the needs of learners cannot be called teaching. In this regard Mays (2005, 215) is legitimately concerned that DE is often driven by economic rather than pedagogic concerns.

Lentell (2005) elaborates on the concept of scale: she is of the opinion that DE can take education and training to scale because scarce human resources are used to their optimum (tutors do not have to be subject specialists in order to facilitate the teaching function). But Heydenrych (2001) compares the costs of print-based (500:1 learner–teacher ratio) to engaged online delivery (25:1 learner–teacher ratio) in this context, and there is a drastic change in economies when contact and continuous support are added to courses with acceptable learner–teacher ratios – it is at least five times more expensive. Mays (2005, 223) concludes that quality distance education is not necessarily a cheap alternative to more traditional contact-based provision, and warns that the necessary

investment may not be made in the development and maintenance of appropriate learner support systems. The support and tutoring functions will be drastically affected by the nearly impossible economies propagated by the agents involved in the production and management of DE in South Africa. What will be the long-term role of the distance teacher as these forced and powerful economies develop? To get to this answer it is worthwhile to highlight the development of DE over the past century, when there was a shift away from the industrialised economies-of-scale DE package to engagement.

### **Industrialisation and a lack of human services**

According to Inglis, Ling and Joosten (1999, 32) there is agreement among distance educators that the most important component of teaching is the opportunities that are provided for learners to interact in order to construct knowledge in a social context. This poses quite a challenge to distance delivery, especially because economies and production realities tend to dominate. In an industrial production and delivery culture, learners receive learning packages as passive receivers of knowledge, resulting in an increasing distance developing between those who author and produce the materials, and the learners themselves. This process is labelled 'text production' (Evans and Nation 1989, 245). Institutions, systems and staff take on the divided and compartmentalised nature of industrialised production, which leads to alienation. According to Sewart (in Evans and Nation 1989, 243), the balance should never swing towards the package and there should always be appropriate forms of 'human services' available. Otto Peters (1998, 162) compares the institution (DDE) to a nineteenth-century correspondence college when he addresses the issue of a lack of support for learners. Heydenrych (2003) points to the fact that this production culture has come to accept a text package, and the production and distribution process as quality DE. The role of the educator has been reduced to assisting with the authoring of subject discipline texts and marking of summative examinations on the majority of courses. This delivery landscape may lead to 'false economies' as an essential part is not accounted for – the conversation between teacher and learner.

### **Evolution of DE**

First- and second-generation DE systems, which were about correspondence (texts) and multimedia respectively, focused largely on the production of learning material and its delivery to the learning community. First-generation distance learning is marked by the predominant use of a single technology/medium and a lack of direct learner interaction, with the educator originating the instruction. Correspondence distance education is a typical form of first-generation DE (Bates 1995, 23; Guglielmo 1998, 36). Much of the work of earlier theorists, like Peters and Wedemeyer, addressed mass distance education development and independent study (Garrison 2000). This work had a profound influence on the evolution of large DE institutions, in terms of production systems and organisational planning. Second-generation DE is characterised by a multimedia ap-

proach facilitated by computers (Computer-Assisted Learning [CAL]). Wedemeyer's work made a strong contribution in the early stages of second-generation DE, with the introduction of the concept of articulated instructional media (AIM) at the Open University of the United Kingdom (OUUK) (Garrison 2000, 6). This proposed a unique system that would support course design utilising media and technology. In addition, course packages would be supported through counselling, and resource and learning centres. Unfortunately, Wedemeyer and Peters assigned priority to matters organisational and industrial (organisational structure, product development and production) over teaching and learning.

The first two generations saw two-way communication with and between learners being kept to a minimum. Third-generation DE is based on two-way communications media that allow for direct interaction between the educator, who originates the instruction, and the remote learner – and among remote learners themselves. Third-generation DE aims to provide a more equal distribution of communication between learner and educator, and among learners. In his later work, Peters recognised the need to address teaching at a distance and he introduced the concept of 'social intercourse' (Garrison 2000, 7). Although there may be a need for independence with DE learners, there is also an argument to be made for continuous interaction facilitated by the educator. Holmberg (1995, 47) (see also Garrison 2000, 7), as a third-generation DE theorist, introduced the argument that although substantial conversation can be contained in pre-produced courses, continuous communication between learner and educator is important in DE. But is there an improvement in learner success as a result of engagement?

### **Success through engagement**

There is sufficient evidence in DE literature that educator engagement with learners on a continuous basis enhances the quality of learning and learner success. The qualitative work of Thorpe (1998) addresses the value of assessment in third-generation distance education, based on the delivery of a course at the OUUK. Not only was assessment structured and paced, but it was supported through computer-mediated communication. Results indicated that tutor presence helped to motivate learners, and interactive feedback directly affected whether and how effectively learners learned. This research supports a more involved role for the educator in terms of engaging and providing continuous constructive feedback in addition to instructional packages. Vandergrift (2002) based her research on Michael Moore's theory of transactional distance, and how it can be reduced through structure and dialogue in DE texts. In her case study analysis she stressed the importance of the guiding presence of the educator in an online learning community in order to provide opportunity for knowledge construction. Structure and dialogue in texts were not as important a factor as community dialogue and shared identity with a group of learners. Independent study packages should, therefore, be enhanced through additional conversation and group activity.

### **Relevant research**

A number of authors have recently addressed the issue of non-engagement in different forms of DE in South Africa. In Kizito's research (2004) on how educators viewed having to move from print to web-based forms of delivery at Unisa, she points out, among other things, that there is no dominant instructional approach, that the system determines the extent of interventions and that educators became aware of their 'added' responsibilities when attempting to communicate online ('it is not an easy way out of teaching'). Kizito ends (2004, 124–125) by identifying a system that does not support or reward innovative teaching. Heydenrych (2002 and 2003) selected a course for pilot delivery in the form of the online learning community. A correlation was established between integrated interactive delivery and learner success. From within the DDE context, Daweti (2004, 4–5) addressed semester-based tuition and the limited opportunity to interact with learners. The research by Daweti (2004) and Heydenrych (2002) was done from an interpretive paradigm (combining both qualitative and quantitative methodologies). Academic and support staff, as well as learners, expressed concerns about their academic reality and how they experience it. Their experience has contributed to a need for change in the delivery landscape. Kilfoil et al. (2005) conducted a longitudinal study on the effect of proper assessment with individualised feedback. A significant increase in learner success was achieved. The work done by Kilfoil et al. (2005) follows a quantitative research methodology guided by a functionalist paradigm. Additional interaction contributed positively to learner success in this particular context. The Council for Higher Education (CHE 2004) commissioned ten case studies, representing the DE spectrum nationally, aimed at describing the standard of intervention and learner success. They produced some serious conclusions, confirming the lack of support and interaction specifically in DDE. All of the above research used rather insignificant samples, but the authors nevertheless shed some valuable light on what might be influencing the quality of distance delivery, namely a decrease in expected levels of interaction and engagement.

### **A strong awareness**

There is, however, not much evidence available regarding the willingness and struggle of DE educators to engage beyond the package in a paper-based DE context to enhance learning. Fay and Hill (2003) provide an interesting approach to the problem of culturally appropriate distance learning methodology. Their work comprises the perspectives of foreign language educators at the Hellenic Open University (HOU) and the University of Manchester (a collaborative delivery project). Three educators were involved in a delivery mix of print, contact and computer-mediated communication. The researchers conclude that employing a relevant DE teaching approach, and not one based on individual educator instincts, is dependent on a strong awareness and understanding of distance learning methodology in order to develop the meta-language with which to for-

multate thinking. This conclusion is particularly relevant to the South African DE situation, as it is unclear to what extent a shared awareness and meta-language are present among academic staff, that would guide their teaching and engagement with learners.

### **Alienation and discourse**

With independent and statutory pressure (CHE 2004; Saide 2003a and b) DE currently faces a tremendous challenge, namely to redevelop a culture of interactive teaching and learning support. There appears to be a historic industrial legacy inherent in mass DE that forces it to become 'dehumanised' in order to meet its illusive economic objective (the scale of packages produced). There being a lack of caring and constructive interactive support for learners it is questioned why the majority of educators do not display signs of wanting to engage more constructively with their learners (DE pass and throughput rates being as low as they are, see *Council on Higher Education Report* [CHE 2004]) and why they do not feel alienated from the very responsibility of being committed educators.

Organisational analysis and research aim at describing, defining and/or explaining aspects of organisations in order to better understand and make sense of organisational existence. Toward this aim it endeavours to uncover facts, theories, accounts, narratives and stories in order to aid analysis. In the context described above, the performance of educators in a unique production and delivery environment is interesting – the aim is to investigate to what extent their performance (compassion for, interaction with and support for learners) is inhibited by discourse that has its origin in a culture of restrictive economies and managed non-engagement. According to Dick and Cassell (2002, 959) a discourse is a historically constructed regime of knowledge (they are informed by a social constructivist epistemology). Discourses articulate and convey formal and informal knowledge and ideologies. In the case of industrialised DE in South Africa there is an interest in the discourse that supports the needs of the delivery system and how 'agents' come to 'speak this language' as part of their occupational identity. There is a need to expose this discourse and the occupational identity supported by it.

## **RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE**

### **A postmodern paradigm**

According to Slembrouck (2004), postmodern thinkers conceive of the social space and the world of material objects as discursive in nature (reality as constructed by actors through discourse). This research departs from the perspective that organisational discourse is the vehicle through which values and meaning are transported to members, and in the process a very specific occupational identity is created. From a Foucauldian perspective (Dick and Cassell 2002, 958) the origin of power is in its *modus operandi* – how it produces compliance or resistance. Individuals form and transform themselves through the internalisation of norms. Discourses transmit norms to people in a particular

organisational context, ideologies are maintained, and the integrity and autonomy of individuals are affected. Relations and processes of power will sustain these discourses.

The objective of this research is to explain the lack of interactive and supportive DE delivery in terms of discourse. This research is conducted from a postmodern perspective, addressing issues of hierarchy, power and domination. It looks at how sustaining this discourse is beneficial to the system and structure. The views of Thompson (1990, 86) are very relevant here: he is of the opinion that some of the collectively shared values and beliefs in an organisation or society contribute to a dominant ideology, which is diffused throughout the organisation and in turn secures the adherence of individuals to the organisational system, structure and 'appropriate' occupational identity. The reproduction of this ideology (or discourse) is the work of organisational organs and systems.

### **Discourse and power**

Dick and Cassell (2002, 959) use Mama's definition of discourse: a discourse is a shared grid of knowledge that one or more people can 'enter' and through which explicit and implicit meanings are shared. Slembrouck (2004) relies on Stupps' definition of discourse analysis in which discourse is defined as being concerned with:

- a) language use beyond the boundaries of a sentence utterance,
- b) the interrelationships between language and society,
- c) the interactive or dialogic properties of everyday communication.

In line with the above characteristics, the research done here is certainly concerned with language use beyond the boundaries of a sentence, in that it addresses language in discourse as it constitutes workplace activity and occupational identity (it will not be concerned with how well actors speak their business language, but with how they and their business are constituted through language!). The discourse that academic staff employ is in constant interaction with the organisational system. It ensures institutional stability as it directs activities and stipulates identity boundaries.

Critical theory holds that people can and should act (Liefoghe 2003, 123) against discourses that have come to acquire the power of ideologies (Thompson 1990). Pettigrew (in Hardy 1996, S8) provides evidence of how interest groups legitimised their demands and 'de-legitimised' the demands of others through the management of meaning. This 'management effort' may, over time, be less visible and members may not be conscious of it. Hardy (1996, S8), working on power and coercion behind organisational change, warns that we must not ignore the power embedded deep in the organisational system, which she believes is often beyond the reach of organisational members (even those who benefit).

### **Critical discourse analysis (CDA)**

The research uses critical discourse analysis to identify themes used by academics/educators as a group. A central aim is to examine the presence of variation, to see how and when variation emerges and what purpose it serves. In taking the perspective that language is constructive, discourse analysts argue that the linguistic resources available to a speaker impose certain parameters on our understanding and action (Liefoghe 2003, 152). In line with one of Potter and Wetherell's (in Liefoghe 2003, 152) principles, discourse analysis (DA) deals with '... how discourse is constructed to perform social actions. It is concerned with how people assemble versions of the world in the course of their interaction, and with the upshot of these versions both immediately and over the long term as part of ideological practices.' This is similar to Fairclough's (in Liefoghe 2003, 154) view on critical discourse analysis as an analysis which aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between firstly discursive practices, events and texts, and secondly wider social and cultural structures, relationships and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power, and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony.

In critical discourse analysis (Dick 2004, 206) the researcher is, therefore, seeking to identify social constructions that have regulatory effects and that, to some extent, are presented as self-evident or common sense features of the social domain being researched. The researcher needs to be able to demonstrate that the discourse exists as a resource with the specific context of the research (the issue of validity). The objective of this research is to point out how discourse supports the status quo (economies, system and structure). The elements of good practice may stand in opposition to the historical discourse and 'academic tradition' currently supported by the institution. Discourse analysis allows the researcher to move away from the individual as the unit of analysis toward tendencies, repertoires or regularities at the level of language in the form of discourse.

### **Appropriateness of methodology**

This methodological approach focuses on how discourse has shaped the educator (occupational identity) in this context, and how some repertoires contradict others to contribute to the perceived culture of non-teaching/non-interaction. Such a discourse is a product (object) of this specific production and delivery context. The power of the discourse and its sanctioning from within makes it political. The chosen methodology of critical discourse analysis (a social constructionist research methodology informed by a postmodern perspective on the organisation) enables the researcher to address the question. For the purpose of this project, no previous research could be located that addressed the influence of discourse on activity in a DE delivery context. From a general



organisational perspective the work of Robichaud et al. (2004) demonstrates how a meta-conversation is responsible for continuously generating the identity of an organisation. A meta-narrative transcends and dominates the narratives of the communities constituting the organisation. Hopkinson (2003) has done similar work using a social constructivist approach to apply discourse analysis to narratives told by staff. The analysis shows how narratives construct the organisation through construction of self (the narrator), customer and manufacturer in a distribution network, and how association with either customer or dealership is supported as a result. Research done by Dick and Cassell (2002), Dick (2004) and Marshall (1994) is particularly relevant to this project as it deals with discourse and occupational identity, the relevance of discourse analysis for organisational research and how discourse influences the management of diversity in the workplace.

CDA is qualitative in nature and extremely labour intensive to conduct, due to the repeated reading and analysis of texts and conversations, but it does address problems on a level (discourse) in organisations that other techniques are unable to achieve. Such a methodology can also distance participants from the research in that they are separated from their very identity in terms of their institutional or occupational language. Although the ultimate objective is not generalisation, participants (and non-participants alike) may feel that they have now been labeled even though this is not the aim of discourse analysis. Making the research public (presentation and publication) may rather cause a disturbance than contribute to positive change. The researcher has to aim to make the process transparent and to inform the organisation, the occupational group and the participants thoroughly at all stages of the process.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The involvement of educators in facilitating learning in the DE environment in South Africa has become highly problematic. While their responsibilities clearly include facilitation and teaching, the system and the context and culture may have forced them to do less of that over the years. The aim, therefore, is to conduct exploratory research at one of South Africa's premier higher education DE institutions, in order to highlight the role of the adopted discourse and identity of DE educators.

### **The research question**

The relevant research discussed in the introductory sections of this discussion did not address the identity and discourse of the educators (academics) per se. Not much information is provided on how they see themselves (occupational identity) from within the teaching context. There needs to be some clarification of how they come to be who they are as educators, and why it appears as if they are not interested in engaging with learners. A critical view would make it important to understand why academic staff are 'subordinates' of a non-interactive delivery process. If there are concerned educators/staff, why are their voices not heard? Why are they 'neglecting' their core business? Is

the identity of the DE practitioner now that of disinterested/bad educator? Why is this accepted?

Accepting these peripheral questions, one would have to investigate how discourse assists in constructing the distance educator in this delivery context. It would be important to determine what norms and discourses are sustaining this behaviour. Contradictions in discourse regarding good practice as against current practice will have to be dealt with. The important question to address through this research is: *what is the role of discourse in sustaining an occupational identity and culture of non-interactive teaching?* Dominant and conflicting discourses have to be identified and explained.

Analysis can be conducted on three levels: the individual, the group and the organisation. For the purpose of this research, discourse is analysed as it is present with individuals, but their individual identity and psychological state do not form part of the objective. The educators in this unique context form a group that sustains a discourse enabled by the production system of the organisation. The research has to provide information as to the discourse practised by the group, that 'prevents' educators from showing greater commitment to interaction with learners, and will then comment on the nature of the organisation that fosters and supports this discourse.

This research aims to investigate the discourse that has begun to constitute the educator in terms of 'not wanting to interact with learners'. It seems to be a language that has formed people and they have become the educators we are talking about here. The labels that may be assigned to these DL educators may be: 'not interested in working', 'don't want to teach', 'the system will do it for us', etc. The presence of this language or discourse may create the perception that the problem is purely educator-driven, but it may be a by-product of an organisational system – as alluded to earlier, when organisational culture and industrialised course economies were discussed. Although the system is now under pressure to change, the discourse is likely to make this change very difficult. Dick (2004, 205) cites Fairclough who states that discourse constitutes the identity of individuals (identity function), the relationships between individuals (relational function) and the ideological systems that exist in society (ideational function). Fairclough recommends a three-dimensional analysis in which discourse is analysed as text, discursive practice and social practice. The researcher will have to find out how text (written or spoken) is constructed and what it is trying to achieve. On an analytical level, discursive practice provides the context of text production. The analyst can infer the types of interpretation that might be made of the texts or parts of the text. As regards social practice, the researcher will examine the propositions used.

### **Research ethics**

Research of a critical nature, which may take a political turn, may cause more harm than good. Upon obtaining informed consent, the names and personal identities of participants had no relevance to the success of the research and were not made public at any stage during the research (anonymity). The research was conducted and documented in

such a way that the profession of the DE educator at the organisation was not affected, i.e. no negativity would be engendered towards similar future research. The process of conducting the research (informing participants and disseminating information) ensured that there was awareness, ownership and buy-in from all levels. All participants and managers received 'a plain language statement' (explaining the research project in simple language). The protection and security of information were dealt with in the information documents.

### **Sampling**

For most forms of qualitative research, and some forms of quantitative research, sample size is very important. When conducting content analysis, for example, which is aimed at frequency counts, bigger samples can be used to confirm or reject a hypothesis: the bigger the sample, the higher the validity of the results. As stated earlier, discourse analysis does not have frequency measurement as an objective. In attempting to identify a specific discourse, it is important to be able to demonstrate that the discourse does exist as a set of regulated statements. According to Marshall (1996, 96) and Dick (2004, 207) a small sample is quite adequate to allow an in-depth exploration of discursive forms. A wide range of interpretive repertoires can emerge from a relatively small number of interviews and produce more valid information than a large sample. The sample for this study consisted of 23 educators from a large DE institution. An increased sample would have made the process of analysis very tedious and perhaps impossible to complete. In order to identify the repertoires, the researcher had to do repeated critical and in-depth readings of texts (interview content).

### **Data collection**

The data collection process was preceded by some exploratory research (examining key institutional documents and research on teaching and interaction in this context) as well as a couple of unstructured interviews with academics and learning development staff. This assisted in identifying topics representing possible discourse repertoires (teaching, learner support and other forms of interaction, and how these responsibilities were enabled by aspects of planning, management and administration). Questions (to guide discussions with staff) were listed around these topics for semi-structured in-depth interviews with educators, in order to uncover the language, discourses and repertoires constituting the culture of non-teaching and ultimately the people shaped by this culture.

Primarily, the researcher had to collect text through qualitative interviewing of a relatively small sample. The focus was text and language, not the individual. The aim was analysis towards explanation rather than generalisation, and the discourse had to be exposed as a 'set of regulated statements' (interpretive repertoires). These were then analysed with consideration for the relationship of these repertoires, with recent discussions of good practice in the interviews. It was possible that educators felt intimidated by the interview situation or the position of the interviewer in the hierarchy

of the organisation. Therefore, it was important for the interviewer to engage himself properly in order to elicit clear information.

### Data analysis

It is important to account for the discourses used by the researcher when constructing the interview questions and to build these into the analysis. The more unstructured the interviews or conversations, the more difficult analyses would be. Dick (2004, 207) recommends a technique by Hollway, called data sampling, to assist with analysis. In this technique the researcher listens to taped conversations repeatedly to get a feel for what is being said. Once the researcher believes he has identified a specific discourse that is of particular importance to the research aims, he transcribes only those parts of the conversation in which the discourse is used. However, it is still very valuable to be able to listen to the contexts in which participants employ certain repertoires during the final analysis, as this may expose elements that were not identified during initial processes. In this instance the interview content was examined for similarities, variations and differences; extracts were made and categorised. The process was repeated several times between interviews and after the final interviews to ensure accurate categorisation. Two groups of particular interpretive repertoires emerged, as shown in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1: Repertoire against engagement**

<b>Lack of direction in the organisation</b>	Constant changes due to the merger 'Corporatisation' of the university
<b>Too little time</b>	Riding the system and getting lazy Too many learners Semesterisation and lack of tuition time Turnaround time is unacceptable
<b>Things are taken care of 'higher up'</b>	They plan and budget for delivery somewhere else in the institution Policy confusion
<b>Ill-prepared learners</b>	Poor-quality school leavers are unsuccessful at university Learners are not inclined to study the disciplines they end up choosing
<b>We don't know where the learners are</b>	Too few learners in some areas Don't know how to locate the learners We are unable to get to know our learners Low learner response
<b>Ignoring national standards</b>	The system does not allow us to uphold national standards Obtaining a qualification here is merely a formality
<b>Need for training</b>	Training of new staff members in DE practice Training to mediate from materials

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**Table 2: Repertoire for engagement**

<b>Putting in extra</b>	Extend contact sessions Deal with all learner calls Use own equipment
<b>Teaching as a calling</b>	Teaching comes from the heart and demands passion Care to deal with learners' personal difficulties
<b>Against current convention</b>	Support learners as far as possible Make friends in the institution to beat the system Changing assessment against all odds Convincing college management
<b>Educator training</b>	Having a qualification in education should be compulsory
<b>Planning and management at departmental level</b>	A self-negotiated process to develop materials An unwritten code of practice in the department Strict turnaround policy in this department Collect learners' complaints and suggestions Introduction schools Department tries to make courses relevant

## DISCUSSION

With the repertoires identified, the consequences of the use of the various repertoires, the relationship between repertoires, and how they undermine or complement one another, will be addressed.

### Dealing with the system

The first repertoire deals with how educators use the character of the production and delivery system to justify and support very limited interaction and engagement with learners. The second repertoire presents the language educators use in their determination to engage, and in the process they proceed 'in spite of the system'.

### 'Supporting the system'

A very strong element of the non-engagement repertoire deals with the issue of time. Educators mentioned being responsible for thousands of learners and not having enough time during the academic semester, adding that they struggle to communicate with learners:

*We cannot commit to a response time to student queries because there are too many students. And we get penalised if we spend too much time with one student. Students have a dire need for moral support and motivation, but there are not enough staff members.*

*The semester system made both lecturers and students lazy. They know there isn't much time to teach so now they do nothing.*

Personal contact will be needed for many struggling learners, but there are ways in which learner problems can be identified, and feedback and assistance provided in writ-

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ing (correspondence). The prescribed standard impersonal tutorial letters are relied upon. The apparent lack of initiative by educators and the commitment to deal with teaching requirements have now created a vicious circle – educators are aware of the lacking teaching elements and commitments, and have now identified low standards as a result:

*We cannot uphold national teaching requirements. The system lets us down. It seems as if we are serving the needs of the institution and not those of the learners.*

*The institution and its qualifications are not up to standard. Should we have to say life starts only after a degree at this university? Then it is merely a formality.*

They claim not to want to commit themselves when their efforts will make no difference and the system will not give them any recognition.

The delivery system appears not to provide sufficient information on learners. Educators claim not to know who or where their learners are, and because of this it is not possible to get to know them all:

*In some areas there are simply too few students to present tutoring or classes. It is no use then to provide it only in the areas where there are a lot of students and cut these students out.*

*I cannot plan. I don't know where the students are in the country.*

*We are teaching in a black hole. We work with students every day and yet we know nothing about them.*

Although this information is not readily provided, the system does indeed have the information and it would be possible to locate learners and attempt some form of engagement. Rather than attempting to find a way around the apparent lack of information, this language supports inaction.

The current transitional period in further education and training at senior certificate level seems not to produce the type of candidate who has a reasonable chance of success in higher DE. Educators claim not to want to engage in a losing battle. It would be an institutional effort to assist these candidates initially, but at this point in time under-prepared learners cannot cope while others make the wrong choices:

*The powers that be accuse higher education of having let down the nation. I beg to differ. The government has let down the nation in allowing our school system to backslide to the extent that it has. If we don't get the right student material we can do nothing to make students pass. If the good ones are mixed with the bad ones then it is even more difficult.*

*If you are not physics inclined then you can't do physics. The students will be more motivated and they will pass.*

Some of the participants were in higher distance teaching for ten years and longer, but only upon discussing and dealing with the lack of interaction do they point out that many staff members never received training upon entering DDE. They do not know how to mediate learning from study materials:

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*I am sure we can do better. But there is a dire need to train new staff members in distance education.*

*I do what I can, but we need to train new staff members to mediate from learning materials.*

Educators admitted that they very seldom have the opportunity to get involved in planning and budgeting for the delivery of their courses. Such attempts would not be worthwhile under the circumstances. Planning and budgeting are done at another level:

*We do not get involved with planning and budgeting of courses. These things are taken care of higher up. Policy differences.*

DE also recently experienced mergers between four institutions, therefore it is understandable that staff feel intimidated by all the changes. They also do not want to be involved in corporate issues – they feel these are part of the business world and that DE is a much different context that should have different priorities. This situation prevents them from innovating and working with learners the way they have to. With an already weakened delivery system it appears as if the apparent lack of direction does not facilitate constructive teaching practice:

*It is very difficult to continue working efficiently under the current constant change and lack of direction. We cannot keep up with all the changes. It leads to confusion. Corporatisation causes problems which affects the quality of work. Unhappy marriages are forged.*

*There are so many differences in policy between the institutions that merged. It is very difficult to get things done.*

### **'Beating the system'**

Those educators who have committed themselves to all possible forms of teaching and engagement have found innovative ways to beat the system. They are open about 'doing the right thing'; they support learners at every opportunity and find ways to deal with barriers that the system may impose:

*Irrespective of what the system dictates, I support my own students in the way I think it should be done.*

*I have taken it on me to provide students with career counselling and orientation. It is my personal belief.*

*I make sure I have the right friends at support departments. You make friends with competent staff. I need to hold hands. One needs these friends everywhere in the system otherwise you don't get things done on time.*

*In the past there were only MCQs. I stopped it. It is not a good way of assessing everything. Lecturers did not even see the learners' work. It was unacceptable. Assessment for this course was in a bad state when I took it over. Educators did not even provide feedback. Learners also have to learn to read and write properly. Longer questions are needed. There should be compulsory assignments for exam access. Otherwise it is a lost opportunity.*

*It would seem as if our college has its own standards. We had to beg college management to institute proper assessment in this course. It is a shame – they were reluctant to agree.*

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They make sure they have the right friends (building relationships), they have drive and commitment, and will simply persist in order to establish the right practice. They are so passionate about their work that they put in extra time and resources to engage learners, and to support them to be successful:

*Discussion classes are voluntary. I schedule them for three hours. But they often continue for over four hours because I encourage learners to ask questions and to tell me what they find difficult.*

*When students call the university their calls end up in a loop. They say they can hold for hours at a time being transferred from one person to the next. Then they call us. I am not satisfied with the administrative support that students get. I try to help them with whatever they need help with – even if this is not my job – this way they can continue with their work and don't get discouraged.*

*Teaching technologies are poorly supplied at regional facilities. We have to struggle to get LCD projectors. I have bought my own just to keep going.*

It would seem that there are departments where the dominant discourse has changed. They have actively worked towards a different culture and can describe their support and engagement efforts in quite a different way:

*We get confused by die instructional designers that are assigned to us. But this department now has a self-negotiated process in place for the development of course materials. And we do coherent planning and integration of materials.*

*This department is different. It has a very strong teaching and support culture. An unwritten code of practice enforced by the head of department.*

*This department has a very strict turnaround policy for online student queries. We need to reply the very same day.*

*Our department has developed a questionnaire internally that we send to students in order to collect their suggestions and complaints. In this way their problems receive attention.*

Educators who do not support system language have a very strong commitment as educators and use a different language when describing themselves:

*I see teaching as life changing and it is a calling to change people's lives. I would love to be a lecturer without research pressure – that is what I like – it comes from my heart to help students. Lecturers and tutors can be trained, but it must come from the heart. You need to have passion to teach via a distance.*

*I know students also have a lot of personal difficulties. This may not be directly related to their studies, but it does have an effect. I see help in this regard as part of my duty as a lecturer.*

Educators who engage with learners and are actively involved with learner success describe themselves as passionate and see their work and career as a calling – such language makes their commitment unconditional. This implies that system discourse does not easily infiltrate their work to make them passive.

### **Silent resistance**

Regarding the relationship between the repertoires, both repertoires operate within the



same system. The dominant discourse simply supports the system that discourages engagement. The one that goes 'against the grain' produces significant results with a small number of educators and departments. The expectation is that this repertoire will break down boundaries or cause significant change in the system. But educators employing this discourse also do not challenge the system in public or in other ways that would seriously challenge institutional practice. Although the system may appear to be coherent and well supported from a distance, cracks have begun to appear in the organisational mosaic and a distorted picture is emerging.

The system is either making this not worthwhile or it is somewhat threatening in its power processes. From this perspective the system does not completely destroy commitment with educators, but prevents any alternative discourse from surfacing or making significant noise. Although these repertoires may differ significantly in content and motivation, they are both 'silent'. Those educators who employ the 'systems discourse' use it as their motivation and it ultimately makes them who they are. But using reasons which identify the system and culture as a problem does not make them react to the system. Officially both groups of educators adapted to their circumstances in different ways, but the adaptation process has reproduced dominant ideologies in this unique delivery environment.

### **Distant cheerleaders**

According to Dick and Cassell (2002, 959) a discourse is a shared grid of knowledge which one or more people can 'enter' and through which explicit and implicit meanings are shared. The knowledge grid that staff members adopt prevents the majority of them from growing and sustaining a strong need to communicate and engage with learners. This discourse motivates and justifies low levels of activity in and beyond materials that, in turn, sustain the current delivery culture – tears have begun to appear in the quilt of interrelated activities that comprises the DE learning experience.

The adoption of what could be described as 'systems discourse' was successful to the extent that the majority of educators are now thinking and acting accordingly. Decision-making has also been influenced by this discourse. As a consequence a system has developed in DE which does not provide sufficient support to learners, and in which educators do not interact with learners on a regular basis to enhance learning (as discussed in the introduction). Educators are made to accept that they only need to communicate with learners through a manual and a limited number of tutorial letters. There is no evidence that materials alone (texts) can provide all the support and interaction needed to make distance learning successful. The DDE production and delivery process is a very strong industrialised process; economies have adapted according to the dominant discourse and there is mutual reinforcement to support a twisted rainbow of rearranged priorities.

The institutional management have adopted the rather strange role of 'distant cheerleaders' (Prasad and Mills 1997, 5) – they will never publicly deny the value of

engagement and other forms of learner support, but will also not reward innovation by committed educators or initiate significant change in practice and systems. With this ‘distance’ staff members who do engage in a discourse that calls for engagement are seen as individuals with their ‘own missions’. The power in the institution cannot be assigned to a particular group of managers, but lies in the process of transferring the discourse to staff. This process is supported by managerial ideologies surrounding key organisational terminologies like *costs*, *budgets*, *subsidies*, etc. The underlying discourse is also never ‘pushed’ into the public spotlight because individuals will compromise themselves (Dick and Cassell 2002, 967) – nobody would like to be exposed as having contributed to a system that actively discourages engagement.

### **Occupational identity**

Inherent in mass production environments is the tendency to reduce workers to an undifferentiated identity (Huws 2006, 2). In the DE context the role of academic staff, as well as professional and administrative staff, has been reduced as the system and economies have expanded and come to dominate teaching and support. Educators have had to become supporters of the changing specifications of the learning experience. From one point of view they represent a very specific organisational block, ‘gelled’ together through an occupational language. From another point of view this language imposes requirements and restrictions for entry into the group and even generates internal solidarity around the supposed contribution and role of the distance educator.

The ‘effectiveness’ of educators is determined by the boundaries of a reduced delivery landscape and their group identity is rallied around a new occupational profile (Huws 2006, 2). This identity appears to be solid and in line with the system. But, in spite of the enormous responsibility of the educator as a mediator of knowledge construction (learning), a responsibility that is not denied, it seems as if there is underlying ambivalence. Those educators who practise a different discourse (‘beating the system’) promote the appearance of complying, but have found their commitment to be stronger and they practise a silent and deeper resistance which never becomes public.

### **CONCLUSION**

The DE mass distance education environment needs a very strong production, distribution and support system (engagement) in order for it to function efficiently. It has, however, assured efficiency only in one part of its core business – production and distribution. The complete learning experience is still dependent on sufficient interaction between learner and distance educator, and this part has been neglected in favour of economies of scale. With human interaction a less scalable component of delivery, it is in the interest of economies to minimise the knowledge about the effect of engagement on learning. Sustaining a discourse which supports a number of related ideologies (e.g. distance education is cheap because it is scalable), is to the advantage of the institution and current management. Keeping this discourse as strong as possible will make

it almost impossible for DE watchdogs (e.g. CHE and SAIDE) to have a serious effect on current practice and economies. It would not be possible for the institution to turn around to a culture of interaction and engagement without serious consequences.

Identifying the discourse that forms the occupational identity and role of educators points to organisational aspects of mass DE education institutions that were hitherto left virtually untouched by researchers in DE organisations. Discourse which legitimises disengagement as acceptable or unacceptable are available to individuals to account for their own career experiences. Most educators accept the non-engagement discourse, while others change practice without influencing the system. There is no apparent resistance from educators regarding their diminished role. The process of practising the discourse provided by the system, assists in the construction of a specific identity. The institutional interactional context (interpersonal organisational activities) mediates the reproduction of this identity. From a distance it would be possible to describe DE educators as not being interested or committed to engage with learners, or in the words of a participant they are labeled as 'lazy'.

This research will possibly initiate research into other aspects of mass DE organisations. Such organisations require enormous structures and strong coordination that may impact forcefully on underlying discourse. Publication may have an impact on how the role and responsibilities of DE educators/lecturers in DDE are viewed. It addresses a 'below-the-surface' factor in wanting to highlight the role of discourse in sustaining practice in a dominating system. It can also make a substantial contribution to a culture of critical enquiry into practice and system that, in turn, ensures the improvement of DE teaching and support. Raising awareness on the role of discourse may point to a need for a different approach to staff development and training, as well as organisational change, to enable not only a change in discourse, but also to improve practice at operational level.

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