



Seeking common ground in the learning development process

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ABSTRACT

It is necessary for distance education institutions to seek common ground among all participants (i.e., the traditional academic, the learning developer and diverse student populations in the varying contexts in which distance education occurs) who are involved in the learning development process in order to align these participants and ensure quality study materials. The aim of this article is to describe and explain how the University of South Africa (Unisa) creates such common ground as prescribed by the Unisa Tuition Policies (2002). The unit responsible for this work is the Institute for Curriculum and Learning Development (ICLD), which uses various learning theories (e.g. the constructivist learning theory). This article explains the typical (ICLD) process, and focuses on the team work approach.

The study material used as a case study in this article resulted from the work of the ICLD and was given national recognition in South Africa. The case study, which was based on the constructivist approach, illustrates the common ground among those parties who have a vested interest in the outcome of the process. The field of distance education provides many opportunities to find common ground among the participants. However, a further paradigm shift can catapult the development of distance education study material onto even higher developmental levels.

INTRODUCTION

It is necessary for distance education institutions to seek common ground among all participants (the traditional academic, the learning developer and diverse student populations in the varying contexts in which distance education occurs) who are involved in the learning development process, in order to align these participants and ensure quality study material. However, many universities in South Africa use a fragmented process to develop study materials. The process is fragmented because, usually, lecturers at a university develop curricula for specific courses, write content for these curricula and pass the draft on to instructional designers who then design and develop the materials. Instructional designers thus enter the process only after the manuscript has been written. As Diamond (1998, 2) says, 'There is a tendency to design courses that have little or no relationship to the curriculum that is in place.' This view is supported by the Commonwealth of Learning article (Murphy 2000), which states that authors prescribe the content, since it is authors who have content expertise in a discipline. This leads to a general agreement on what is to be learnt in the course and only then is the development of the material commissioned.

Contrary to the above scenario, learning developers at the University of South Africa (Unisa) are involved in the whole process of curricula, content and study material design and development. These learning developers previously functioned as instructional designers. Their role has now changed. Previously the instructional designer instructed the participants on the process, but now 'the alternative view sees learning as part of an inevitably unfinished, but continuous process that goes on throughout life' as 'learning is not . . . a passive activity' (Brown and Duguid 1992, 2). Thus, learning designers have moved from being educational advisors to active participants in the learning design process. They provide input into curricula content and reach consensus with the lecturers concerned on the course planning process. Attention is given to the development timeline and the target audience is taken into consideration, based on existing student profiles. This is an approach that is not commonly used elsewhere (Murphy 2000).

BACKGROUND

The Institute for Curriculum and Learning Development (ICLD) at Unisa investigates learning theories and is responsible for supporting academics in curriculum development.

The Unisa Tuition Policies (2002) mandates the ICLD to

- assist academics in the context of a team approach to course/programme design, with specific roles and responsibilities clearly delineated
- embed appropriate student support strategies in every course
- create and sustain a student-friendly environment by coordinating and integrating resources, structures and services (e.g., study materials) supported by an organisational ethos of commitment to learners
- ensure quality promotion, assurance and control mechanisms that adhere to national and international quality standards of distance education.

The Unisa Tuition Policies (2002) activates other service departments such as student counselling and development, registration, despatch, the library, student support and regional learning centres as well as all academics. However, the following specifically falls within the ambit of learning development: ‘There should be an agreed and planned process of course design, development, production and delivery with a view to integrating and coordinating Unisa systems’ (Unisa Tuition Policies 2002). In order to assist the ICLD in this process, ‘suitably qualified and experienced teams will be selected from academic departments involved’ (Unisa Tuition Policies 2002).

With the above in mind, the aim of this article is to describe how the ICLD process creates the common ground that is prescribed by the above-mentioned Unisa Tuition Policies. The point of departure for the work of the ICLD is various learning theories that are addressed in the following section.

THE POINT OF DEPARTURE OF THE ICLD

In order to justify the use of the concept *learning theory*, it is important to know that ‘a model is a mental picture that helps us understand something we cannot see or experience directly’ (Dorin, Demmin and Gabel in Mergel 1998, 2). As the ICLD works in a concrete manner, it is clear that one cannot use the concept *model* to describe their work. The Commonwealth of Learning Website for instructional design for self-learning in distance education makes the following statement: ‘Course design and development is a people-orientated activity that calls for creativity and innovation; it cannot be fully captured by a neat prescriptive model, just as there can never be a single model of human learning’ (Murphy 2000). We agree with this sentiment, although the preferred term for the ICLD is *learning theory*. Mergel (1998) refers to Dorin, Demmin and Gabel (1990), who state that a theory provides a general explanation for observations made over time. A theory explains and predicts behaviour, can never be established beyond all doubt, may be modified, is seldom thrown out completely, may be widely accepted for a long time and then later be disproved.

In line with Mergel’s approach, the ICLD investigated three basic learning theories, namely behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism. Briefly, *behaviourism* is based on observable changes in behaviour and on new behavioural patterns that are repeated until they become automatic. *Cognitivism* is based on the thought processes behind the behaviour. Behavioural changes are seen as indicators to what is happening inside the learner’s mind. Finally, *constructivism* is based on the premise that all human beings construct their own perspective of the world through individual experiences and schemata. Constructivism focuses on enabling the learner to solve problems in personally authentic situations, as illustrated in the case study.

Mergel (1998, 14) points out that ‘[c]onstructivism . . . promotes a more open-ended learning experience, where the methods and results of learning are not easily measured and may not be the same for each learner’. Jonassen (undated) gives the following advantages, all of which emanate from the use of constructivism in instructional design. It

- provides a multiple representation of reality
- presents authentic tasks that are contextualised

- provides real-world case-based learning environments
- fosters reflective practice
- enables the construction of context- and content-dependent knowledge
- supports collaborative construction of knowledge through social negotiation while not competing for recognition among learners.

Thus, the ICLD uses the constructivist learning theory as a basis for much of its work as required by the learning situation. Constructivism seeks to find common ground among the various voices in the distance education arena. This is best done by means of teamwork.

Teamwork

The Commonwealth of Learning (Murphy 2000) reflects on the use of teams in instructional design. The authors presume that most distance education development takes place in a team environment, even though study material may only have one author. Teamwork implies many discussions, thrashing out of differences and debates regarding the merit of content and process. Teamwork is a confrontational process, since authors have to develop courses in a manner that is foreign to their own learning experiences and radically different from their usual teaching practice. ‘Team work can lead to a significant improvement in the overall quality of learning material’ (Murphy 2000). The focus is on the activities and on the interaction among participants that would help build a constructive learning community. Another Internet source (Teamwork (undated)) states that ‘teamwork becomes important in the development and dissemination of instructional materials’ as ‘these team members provide expertise in particular areas in which the instructor does not have experience’.

Based on the constructivist approach which culminates in the teamwork of the ICLD, common ground is found between parties who have a vested interest in the outcome of the process. The following section explains the ICLD process in detail.

The Institute for Curriculum and Learning Development process

The ICLD starts the process by planning the design stage. A basic list of questions is used and adapted where necessary to establish the curriculum:

- Who are the participants and the stakeholders in the learning environment?
- What national, provincial, global and professional aims play a role?
- What are the implied norms and values?
- What are the actions a competent learner should undertake?
- What are the tools they should use?
- What are the rules?
- Who are our learners?
- What is the context?
- What are the roles?
- What impact should the graduate have on the discipline, the profession and the society?
- What problems do students encounter in their workplace?

- What is an appropriate media mix?
- What timelines and costs are involved?

Finally, the interested and affected parties agree on the course outline, once common ground has been achieved about the type of constructive approach to be used.

The second phase is the development stage. In this stage

- the structure of the units is planned
- layout guidelines are agreed upon
- the appropriate language level for writing the material is agreed upon
- the contextual resources are shared
- the assessment strategies are planned
- physical material is written, reviewed and edited.

During the third phase, the production phase, the agreed-upon timeline is scheduled into concrete delivery dates and the actual layout, printing, binding and packaging are completed.

Stage four entails the delivery of the study material to the student from the warehouse in which the material is stored.

The final stage in this cyclical process is the evaluation stage. This can only take place once the study material has been used by learners and lecturers alike for a minimum period of one year. An evaluation instrument is used which encompasses the learners' evaluation of the materials, study assignment results, throughput rates, peer reviews, focus group interviews and the appointment of quality readers who assess the general success of the product.

The above process is illustrated by Figure 1.

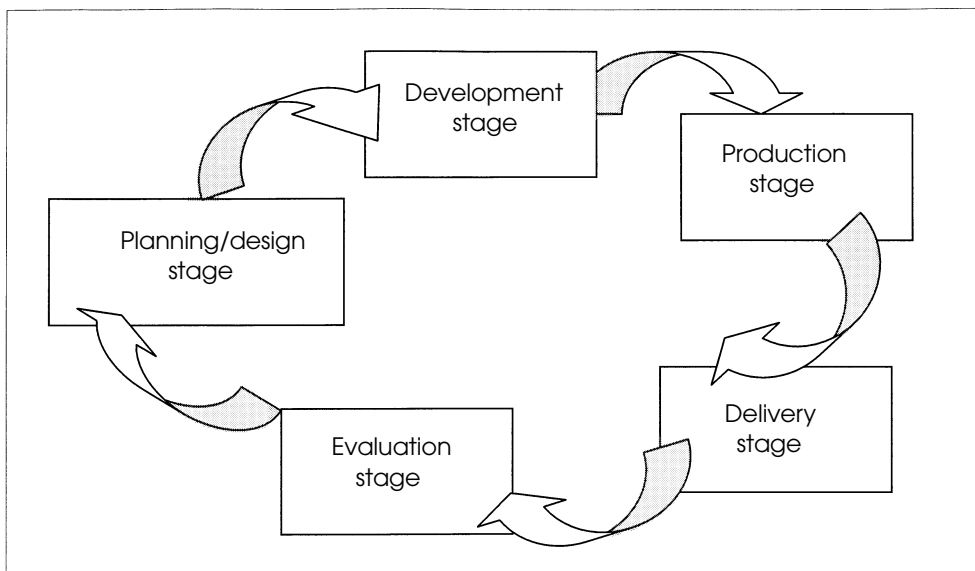


Figure 1: Course team process

CASE STUDY TO ILLUSTRATE THE CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH USED BY THE ICLD

As mentioned, this article reports on the extent to which the ICLD process addresses the Unisa Tuition Policy. The case selected for this report was awarded a prize in August 2004 for Best Study Material Development in the individual category by a national organisation in South Africa that is responsible for quality control in distance education. The department that obtained this award was the Department of Missiology, School of Theology, College of Human Sciences, Unisa.

The following report was issued by the organisation (i.e., about the study material):

- The learning is fully experiential with clear links to students' existing knowledge, but knowledge is always presented as open-ended (constructivist approach).
- There are frequent activities that require students to interrogate the concepts.
- The focus is general with a clear overview provided and conceptual engagement is challenging, but presented in manageable chunks.
- The assessment is clearly authentic and realistic with feedback provided, and the use of the journal provides intrinsic motivation.
- The teacher is evidently a co-learner and the use of the pilgrim/companion idea encourages collaborative learning.
- The material is culturally respectful in every sense and the conversational style encourages dialogue both with the 'companion' and the teacher. The journal is used to practise and assess the development of deep reflection.
- We liked the innovative use of a novel, *The Poisonwood Bible* as a required text. The requirement that students reflect on the characters and incidents in the novel using the concepts that they are learning in the course, supported the notion that knowledge is constructed in a variety of contexts and not just within the content of the course.

Moreover, the ICLD gave the following motivation for awarding the Missiology study material the excellence in print media award in the individual category:

LEARNING DESIGN

In this module the learning outcomes are stated clearly in the Introduction of the study guide and in the words of the author 'it does what it set out to do'. The outcomes are also effective because each learner is made aware of the outcomes at the beginning of the module. This 'up-front approach' enables learners to keep the outcomes in mind as they move through the learning experience and to decide how the outcomes could be accomplished in their experience of the study material. This gives learners a sense of security as they enter into a new learning experience. They can then move more confidently through the whole process.

The context of this whole learning experience is the learner's real life/work contexts. The problem is an inter-religious encounter in context. Since South Africa and most other countries are inter-cultural and inter-religious, learners are invited to face the challenge of relating to a person of another faith head-on. The learner is encouraged to make and exchange meaning in the relationship with his or her pilgrim companion, through the required reading and supplementary reading at the end of each study unit. This is done by using a learning journal where learners can refine their missiological

thought, and by submitting assignments on which the author personally gives excellent feedback.

Ample activities are provided to give learners the opportunity to become conversant with the language of the discipline on the subject of inter-religious encounter. The supplementary reading suggested at the end of each study unit enables learners to discover for themselves the resources available, which enables them to grow in their understanding of the subject matter.

ASSESSMENT

Formative assessment

All of the activities are connected to the formative assessment, which consists of three assignments. In completing the activities, the learners would have developed the skills and knowledge needed to complete the formative assessment assignments. These assignments reflect the principle of increasing complexity and incorporate a demonstration of foundational knowledge, applied skills and reflexivity. The increased complexity allows for developmental learning to take place and be integrated into the learners' lives.

Furthermore, the learning experience is designed in a very holistic way. The 'de-signing down' principle has guided the process of developing this module, which means that the outcomes are clearly stated in the Introduction to the study guide. They are then given concrete expression in the assignments that are required. The activities, assignments and study material form a whole. The Introduction to the study guide and tutorial letters contain material about the assessment criteria.¹

Summative assessment

There is no examination for this module. The summative assessment is done using a learning journal. This is very functional because deeper forms of learning are encouraged that cultivate lifelong learning skills. The learning journal also encourages reflexive competence and critical thinking.

LEARNER SUPPORT

Correspondence support

The purpose of feedback on assignments is to facilitate the learning process, provide further tuition, affirm the learner and give guidance and/or correction where necessary, as well as giving emotional and academic support. All this was done extremely well. Support was structured and provided promptly by e-mail and telephone.

Face-to-face support

Face-to-face support usually took place on an individual basis. As such, it was irregular and spontaneous and occurred as requested.

MOTIVATION FOR 95 PER CENT ASSESSMENT MARK

In essence, the mark was awarded on the ground of the whole learning design. It was contextual, holistic and developmental. In terms of the outcomes, it achieved what it promised to do. By the end of the module, many learners expressed a sense of liberation from the narrow ideas (i.e., about people of other faiths) they had had when they began the module. This is regarded as authentic, transformative learning.

The constructivist learning paradigm was translated in this module so that facilitated learning could take place in new ways for Unisa learners. The learners constructed meaning and applied it to their personal contexts. The personal transformation that occurred had social consequences because new social relationships were created. This is what makes this module groundbreaking.

The learning design of this module is well constructed and innovative and therefore deserves recognition. A golden thread or central metaphor gave coherence to the learning design. It makes a contribution that goes beyond Unisa to the world we live in. The learning material is most effective and represents good teaching and learning.

A SUMMARY OF THE COMMON GROUND FOUND IN THE LEARNING DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

From the above report it is clear that the learning development process that is followed at the ICLD addresses the following issues:

- The primary audience for distance education programmes is the adult learner participating in an educational experience in which he or she is separated from the instructor or other learners by space/time.
- Successful distance education learners need to be independent individuals who are motivated and have focused learning goals in mind (Innovations in Distance Education (undated)). They need to participate legitimately and peripherally in authentic social practice in rich and productive ways ‘making it possible for them to “steal” the knowledge they need’ (Brown and Duguid 1992).
- Most adult learners need flexibility in programme structure because of their responsibilities, which include holding down full-time jobs and looking after their families.
- The author should not necessarily be the same person as the learning developer. Both the author and the learning developer create the curriculum, and both are involved in the design and development of the study material (Innovations in Distance Education (undated)).
- Adult learners typically want practical information that they can use immediately. Recent instructional theories tend to focus on authentic learning tasks that are based on real-life tasks. These tasks are used as a driving force for learning, because such tasks help learners to integrate the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for effective task performance (Van Merriënboer, Kirschner and Kester 2003). According to Vygotsky’s social constructivist view of development, authentic learning activities are needed to ensure collaborative problem solving (Harland 2003).

- In order to construct socially situated learning experiences, activities need to be more complex (Ardichvill 2003).
- The challenges that the study material sets push the student to extend beyond the factual knowledge base into a constructivist learning style (Graffam 2003).
- Scaffolding should be implemented. This entails ‘a combination of performance support and fading – initially, the support enables a learner to achieve a goal or action not achievable without that support. When the learner achieves the desired goal, support gradually diminishes until it is no longer needed’ (Van Merriënboer, Kirschner and Kester 2003, 5).
- Feedback needs to be given to students by coaching them in cognitive strategies (Van Merriënboer, Kirschner and Kester 2003).
- The use of metaphors in study materials creates a learning environment by delineating the ‘space’ or ‘place’ where learning occurs (Wilson 1995).
- In order to enrich the adult learner’s learning experience, the voices of his or her world must be heard (Prinsloo 2004).

CONCLUSION

Distance education is ripe with opportunities for finding common ground among the traditional academic, the learning developer, the diverse student populations and the varying contexts in which distance education occurs. A paradigm shift is needed, however, since, in the past, many ideas for the development of study material in distance education remained ‘stuck on the shoulders of previous giants’ (Milton 2000, 10).

The use of the constructivist approach for the development of materials in distance education has allowed the ICLD to find the necessary common ground among all participants concerned. This process embodies (Milton 2000, 10) statement that ‘Learning is never a distanced event. Learning is entirely intimate and personal. It is the delivery platform that may be distally located, but learning is not’.

The example of the award-winning study material for Missiology has embraced ‘a new philosophical approach and understanding about the ways in which learning and learners interface in a “placeless” environment’ (p. 10). Hopefully, this newly found common ground is a harbinger for further innovative development in the growing and emerging field of distance education.

NOTE

1 Unisa sends tutorial letters to students to give feedback on assignments and additional learner support.

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