# Bureau for Learning Development: mapping the evolution

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## ABSTRACT

A key characteristic of organisational learning is the concern with transformation and reflexive practice. In order to bring fuller perspective to our immediate business, this paper sketches the developments of the Bureau for Learning Development at Unisa over the last thirty years. In listing the challenges, processes and accomplishments of the bureau, the paper underscores the fact that institutions and organisations do not change themselves; people change them.

## INTRODUCTION

This document is meant to provide an overview of the transformation processes that have contributed to how the Bureau for Learning Development is structured and functions today. However, the attempt to bring out the essence of any complex system is not without its challenges and limitations.

Firstly, the change situation we are dealing with could be described as "messy, soft, and unbounded" (Ackoff 1993:51-53). It has the following characteristics:

- most issues cannot be easily described ,
- there is no clearly identifiable bottom line solution,
- change and its implications cannot be disentangled from its context,
- there is greater unpredictability, and
- interpersonal sensitivity is required.

Secondly, there is no single way to interpret phenomena or our understanding of them. As Rapport (1997:182) puts it, "there could never be a 'complete' theory or final interpretation of the world or anything else, merely an array of succeeding (conversing) perspectives ...; every interpretation, every 'fact', simply one version among many".

What I have "mapped" is, therefore, not a conclusive description of all events and outcomes of interactions in the Bureau. It is also not a singular or objective representation of our professional life. Rather, I have integrated input from a variety of sources: published and unpublished reports, records of meetings and decisions taken, and oral communication with staff.

Beginning with our present state, this account reveals how we have built on past strength and experience to carve better work strategies.

## DEFINING WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO

### Our vision

The Bureau for Learning Development (BLD) at Unisa is committed to promoting excellence in open distance learning by creating an enabling environment and leadership through transformative and innovative design, research and development for Unisa and the broader community.

**Our mission**

The Bureau for Learning Development's mission is to serve, support and lead staff, learners and other stakeholders in an accountable and transformative way by:

- Initiating and sustaining distance education discourse
- Developing and sustaining different learning environments through research and innovative ways of facilitating learning
- Building capacity in open distance learning through the dissemination of information, research, and professional staff development
- Managing the learning materials' design and development process
- Designing and developing quality learning materials
- Applying quality assurance mechanisms such as course evaluations, team approach and critical review
- Contributing to, influencing and implementing relevant policies - in order to create a supportive culture of reflective practice and lifelong learning towards quality of life for all.

**What we value**

- Trust: trust one another in following the shared intentions of the group
- Accountability: accountability to self and others for practices and purposes in an open and transparent way
- Integrity: interact with sincerity, honesty and integrity
- Participation: actively participate in the bureau through sharing and support
- Innovation: continuously strive for innovation and creativity
- Professionalism: professionalism, individually and collectively, through a reflective commitment to the ideals of the Bureau
- Democracy: commit ourselves to sharing power within the group, thus enhancing stability
- Diversity: value, respect and promote diversity as a corner stone for a successful future for all
- Respect: respect for one another through mutual support, acknowledgement of individual worth and a willingness to listen and learn from one another

**Our focus areas**

Learning development: print delivery
Learning development: online delivery
Staff development
Research support and development

**Our artefacts**

- Progressio, a partially refereed journal circulated in print since the first issue in 1979 up to volume 21(1) 1999, thereafter published biannually online
- Memos, a bimonthly newsletter
- Annual reports
- Reports and other documents generated during the change process
- New website
- New logo and marketing materials

**OUR CORE BUSINESS: DIRECTING EDUCATION PRACTICE AND CHANGING SYSTEMS**

The bureau plays a key role in critiquing prevailing systems, introducing alternative viewpoints and adapting institutional frameworks to meet the diverse needs of distance learners. As shown in the table below, we influence education practice at least at three levels:

| | From | To |
|---|---|---|
| Pedagogic understanding | <ul><li>knowledge as objective or universal truth</li><li>teaching as transmission of knowledge</li><li>learner as passive recipient of a body of knowledge</li><li>curricula as closed agendas</li><li>education as qualification</li></ul> | <ul><li>knowledge as a shared construction</li><li>teaching as learning and facilitation of learning</li><li>learner as active participant in meaning making</li><li>curricula as open and flexible</li><li>education as vehicle for social transformation</li></ul> |
| Work patterns | <ul><li>fragmented course development</li><li>individual authors</li><li>isolated and competitive work style</li><li>single departmental orientation</li></ul> | <ul><li>holistic course development</li><li>team authoring, multiple input</li><li>collegial and collaborative style</li><li>intra- and interdepartmental networks</li></ul> |
| Systems and infrastructure | <ul><li>rigid/closed tuition structures/ processes</li><li>policy as a form of control and monitoring</li><li>lack of opportunities for continuous learning and development</li><li>exclusive management and control of information</li></ul> | <ul><li>adaptable/open tuition structures/processes</li><li>policy as enabling framework</li><li>more opportunities for continuous learning and personal development</li><li>inclusive management and access to information</li></ul> |

**LOOKING BACK**

**Historical background**

The foregoing description of what the Bureau for Learning Development stands for is one of the most recent developments in the thirty-year old history of this unit. However, our present functions have - to a large extent - grown out of earlier initiatives by individuals and teams. While it is not possible to capture all the events and circumstances surrounding the evolution of the bureau, certain developments stand out. Two devices are used to highlight those developments:

**Contributions and accomplishments**

This historical account of the bureau's accomplishments, albeit incomplete, helps us gain some understanding of

- the role that the bureau has played in the institution,
- specific functions associated with the execution of that role, and
- environmental factors influencing the bureau.

**Time line**

The time line below briefly sketches the bureau's history since its establishment in 1970 (Le Roux 1995). Note the pattern in the names adopted so far. The last two years, however, receive more attention because of their topicality.

**Time line of the Bureau's transformation:  some of the key developments**

| | Key developments | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pre 2000 | 1970: Bureau for University Research (G Steyn) | 1980: Change name Bureau for Teaching Development (H Gouws, S Engelbrecht, R Yule) | 1989: Change of name to Bureau for University Teaching (D Adey; P Steyn) | |
| Jan-June 2000 | 4 New instructional designers | | | |
| July-Dec 2000 | Internal survey by J Heydenrych | Presentation of team-based Bureau structure to Top Management | BMC is established | |
| Jan-June 2001 | HOD [P Steyn] leaves | Acting HOD appointment [A Venter] | | |
| July-Dec 2001 | Retreat #1 / Retreat#2 Finalisation of vision & mission statement | Identification of core functions/projects | Vote for new name - BLD | Election of convenors |
| Jan-June 2002 | Official: BUT is now BLD | ABC + Swot analysis | 11 New Learning Developers | JD's & evaluation |

**Contributions and accomplishments**

Over the years the span of our involvement has cut across a wide range of areas as manifest in the following contributions:

- Coordination and provision of tele- and videoconferencing services
- Offering the course Media for Nursing student teachers
- Teaching some of the modules of the Diploma in Tertiary Education
- Development and teaching of the Postgraduate Diploma in Distance Education
- Presenting the Eureka orientation programme to all new staff
- The DELTA Project served as prelude to the team approach to course design and development. More intensive and inclusive processes followed with the aim of gaining support and commitment from all institutional role players.
- The bureau initiated all corporate agreements - locally and internationally- prior to the establishment of the university's Collaboration Unit.
- An investigation by the Central Planning Unit into publishing management system. A report was released in 1998.
- Participation in the distance education and training council audit which led to the international accreditation of UNISA in January 2002
- Input into the formulation and implementation of the university's tuition and assessment policies

- The Structuring of online learning and support document provided the basis for Unisa's current online learning provision.

Annual research reports contain information on specific projects, publications and other significant accomplishments by individual staff members.

**THE 2000-2002 PERIOD**

Identification of problem areas

Current developments have without doubt made a significant mark in our organisational life. The need for change in the bureau is prompted by conditions that are typical of many organisations (Mabey & Pugh 1999:16-17):

- The current nature of an organisation contributes to its failure to achieve its objectives.

  The unstructured way in which we have been dealing with requests from departments could not be sustained. It was difficult to measure our effectiveness or predict what would work best under given circumstances.

- Improving the capacity to adapt more readily to environmental change

  Education transformation policies make new demands on institutions. Furthermore, rapidly developing trends in subject fields such as law and economic and management sciences have direct impact on curricula. To support lecturers in meeting all these challenges, substantial numbers of new staff were recruited into the bureau.

- Adapting new technologies and working methods which require changes in structure, systems and attitudes

  There is an urgent need to create diverse learning opportunities by means of appropriate media and technologies. We must equip ourselves and the entire institution to support all levels and modes of tuition.

- Creating new "operating units" to make maximum use of the people involved

  The project or team approach to course development and the new convenor roles are some of the procedural factors that change the way we work.

**Getting top management buy-in**

Presentations were made -and were met with approval- at university Tuition Committee meetings regarding our understanding of the following aspects and their implications for the bureau and the rest of the university:

- Tuition policy
- Assessment policy
- Online learning
- Getting our house in order
- Changing the way we are managed

Senge (1994:15) warns that it is poorly designed systems, not incompetent or unmotivated individuals, that cause most organisational problems. Instituting the Bureau Management

Committee (BMC) was a major step toward creating a more transparent, democratic and empathetic management style which is consistent with the organic structure we have.

**Changing the way we interact**

We have had several interventions since 2000, each being a progression from the previous but shifting the focus slightly.

Internal facilitation: a survey, mainly through interviews, was conducted to establish ways of improving our professional practice. Another session, after the first external facilitation, was arranged to get us to know our professional self.

External facilitation: external intervention was solicited to help us attain a sense of purpose. We had two consultation opportunities with external facilitators. The first retreat, though tense, got us thinking about what is holding us back. The second generated more cooperation and less hostility. It is as a direct result of this second experience that we articulated our vision and mission. Most recently we had an activity-based costing exercise linked to our strategic planning.

**Uncovering deeper-lying issues**

It is common for teams or groups to devote so much energy to the explicit task at hand that the process - how the team works together - is neglected. This was certainly true in our case.
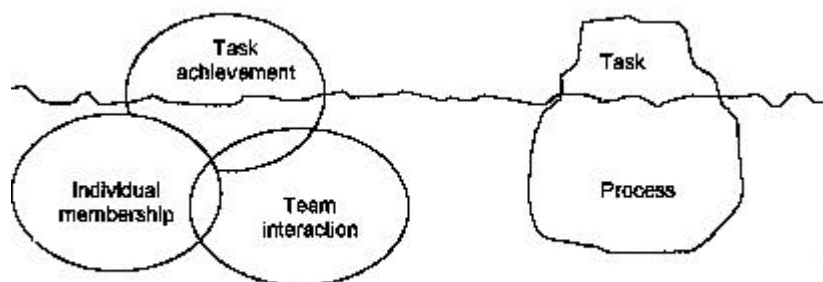


As shown in the diagram above (after Adair 1983), the process aspects lie beneath the surface and should be uncovered before "solutions" are sought. From the moments of reflection that we had, a picture of our culture emerged. It is a culture formed out of dichotomies such as the following:

- diversity - inability to deal with diverse views, preferences, beliefs
- democracy - questioning the legitimacy of our leadership
- passion and drive - lack of appreciation of our own wisdom
- open communication - fear of negative criticism
- common vision and mission - hidden agendas
- commitment - power struggles
- enthusiasm - lack of focus

**Recommendations**

Below is a summary of recommendations emanating from the various interventions:

- BMC be more supportive of change introduced so far

- professional discourse be encouraged
- more opportunities for continued professional development
- proper induction of new staff
- develop Progressio into a fully accredited journal
- establish Bureau's vision and mission
- change name of Bureau

It is pleasing to see that most recommendations have been met and good progress is being made in other areas as well.

- Vision and mission statement: after some struggle over what we perceive to be our main purpose and ideal, we formulated a vision and mission statement for the BLD.
- Changing University Teaching to Learning Development: within the climate of defining our main role in the university, the name Bureau for Learning Development received unanimous support. A few months later the new name was officially announced.
- Communicating a clear message of our core business: once the above was in order, several sessions followed where we looked at our objectives and activities. These were eventually narrowed down to our four focus areas.

## Marketing BLD to the Unisa community

This is a campaign to publicise our new "image" locally and abroad, and to make our services more appealing to clients. Moreover, the marketing campaign is non-confrontational and bottom-up. Our marketing tools range from modest brochures to large pop-up stands. We expect that this vigorous effort will play an effective role in creating better understanding about what we do, how we do it and why.

## Induction programme

One the responsibilities attached to the Staff Development focus area is the orientation and induction of new staff at the Bureau specifically, and in the university in general. The latter area is managed in conjunction with the university's Skills Development Facilitator.

## FORGING AHEAD

## The present and future

The intervention strategies employed to date are based on the Organisational Development framework, and appropriately so for our changed situation. We are able to determine our future state (where we want to be) from our vision and mission statements. Current practices and attitudes reveal our present state: where we are now. Even though the process is iterative rather than linear, now is the time to concern ourselves with the transition state: where and how we should intervene in order to attain the future state.

## Managing the transition

The transition state is about harnessing support for and acceptance of change and how it is introduced. Transparency and supportiveness are built on the following principles:

- seeking and validating information
- promoting free and informed decision-making
- ensuring commitment to those decisions

It is also important to realise that building a shared vision is an on-going endeavour. Thus, we have to bring vitality and freshness to our statements by regularly checking what we really want to achieve (Senge, 1994:12).

**Managing ourselves**

> Be master of your petty annoyances and conserve your energies for the big, worthwhile things. It isn't the mountain ahead that wears you out - it's the grain of sand in your shoe. (Robert Service)

Given the diversity of personalities, opinions, interests and goals that individuals and groups represent, we should not underestimate the need to work hard at building lasting interpersonal and professional relationships.

**Recognising and diffusing defensive routines**

Defensive routines are those habits that we use to protect ourselves from undesirable social pressures or criticism (Argyris 1990). The routines must first be recognised and then systematically dealt with or realistically accommodated in order for learning to take place. This demands reflexive competence on our part.

**Moving beyond blame**

Instead of blaming each other or external circumstances for our problems, we need to recognise that we and the outside belong together. You [I] and the cause of your [my] problems are part of a single system (Senge 1994:14-15).

**CONCLUSION**

The transformation processes we are undergoing reflect the extent to which we are continuously influenced by external forces (sociological, technological, economic, political), internal forces (institutional structures and processes) as well as our personal values and understandings. Our responses, therefore, must accommodate change, deal with complexity, take inconsistency and ambiguity into account, and be concrete in their application (Cushner et al 1992:227).

Along with many unresolved issues that we contend with, we are continuously making the best of our situation. It is our desire to continue to engage one another with a view to opening our history to rewriting.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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